

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark green color, framing the central text.

Pendergast - 07 - The Book of the Dead

**Douglas
Lincoln Child Preston**

The Book of the Dead (2006)

BY

DOUGLAS PRESTON AND LINCOLN CHILD

(Book 3 of the Pendergast Trilogy)

Lincoln Child dedicates this book to his mother, Nancy Child

Douglas Preston dedicates this book to Anna Marguerite McCann
Taggart

Contents

Acknowledgments

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31
- Chapter 32
- Chapter 33
- Chapter 34
- Chapter 35
- Chapter 36
- Chapter 37
- Chapter 38
- Chapter 39
- Chapter 40
- Chapter 41

Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61
Chapter 62
Chapter 63
Chapter 64
Chapter 65
Chapter 66
Chapter 67
Chapter 68
Chapter 69
Chapter 70
Chapter 71
Chapter 72
Chapter 73
Chapter 74
Chapter 75
Chapter 76
Chapter 77
Chapter 78
Chapter 79
Chapter 80
Chapter 81
Chapter 82

A WORD FROM THE AUTHORS
THE PENDERGAST NOVELS
THE NON-PENDERGAST NOVELS

References

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Chapter 1

Early-morning sunlight gilded the cobbled drive of the staff entrance at the New York Museum of Natural History, illuminating a glass pillbox just outside the granite archway. Within the pillbox, a figure sat slumped in his chair: an elderly man, familiar to all museum staff. He puffed contentedly on a calabash pipe and basked in the warmth of one of those false-spring days that occur in New York City in February, the kind that coaxes daffodils, crocuses, and fruit trees into premature bloom, only to freeze them dead later in the month.

“Morning, doctor,” Curly said again and again to any and all passersby, whether mailroom clerk or dean of science. Curators might rise and fall, directors might ascend through the ranks, reign in glory, then plummet to ignominious ruin; man might till the field and then lie beneath; but it seemed Curly would never be shifted from his pillbox. He was as much a fixture in the museum as the ultrasaurus that greeted visitors in the museum’s Great Rotunda.

“Here, pops!”

Frowning at this familiarity, Curly roused himself in time to see a messenger shove a package through the window of his pillbox. The package had sufficient momentum to land on the little shelf where the guard kept his tobacco and mittens.

“Excuse me!” Curly said, rousing himself and waving out the window. “Hey!” But the messenger was already speeding away on his fat-tire mountain bike, black rucksack bulging with packages.

“Goodness,” Curly muttered, staring at the package. It was about twelve inches by eight by eight, wrapped in greasy brown paper, and tied up with an excessive amount of old-fashioned twine. It was so beaten-up Curly wondered if the messenger had been run over by a truck on the way over. The address was written in a childish hand: For the rocks and minerals curator, The Museum of Natural History.

Curly broke up the dottle in the bottom of his pipe while gazing thoughtfully at the package. The museum received hundreds of packages every week from children, containing “donations” for the collection. Such donations included everything from squashed bugs and worthless rocks to arrowheads and mummified roadkill. He

sighed, then rose painfully from the comfort of his chair and tucked the package under his arm. He put the pipe to one side, slid open the door of his pillbox, and stepped into the sunlight, blinking twice. Then he turned in the direction of the mailroom receiving dock, which was only a few hundred feet across the service drive.

“What have you got there, Mr. Tuttle?” came a voice.

Curly glanced toward the voice. It was Digby Greenlaw, the new assistant director for administration, who was just exiting the tunnel from the staff parking lot.

Curly did not answer immediately. He didn’t like Greenlaw and his condescending Mr. Tuttle. A few weeks earlier, Greenlaw had taken exception to the way Curly checked IDs, complaining that he “wasn’t really looking at them.” Heck, Curly didn’t have to look at them—he knew every employee of the museum on sight.

“Package,” he grunted in reply.

Greenlaw’s voice took on an officious tone. “Packages are supposed to be delivered directly to the mailroom. And you’re not supposed to leave your station.”

Curly kept walking. He had reached an age where he found the best way to deal with unpleasantness was to pretend it didn’t exist.

He could hear the footsteps of the administrator quicken behind him, the voice rising a few notches on the assumption he was hard of hearing. “Mr. Tuttle? I said you should not leave your station unattended.”

Curly stopped, turned. “Thank you for offering, doctor.” He held out the package.

Greenlaw stared at it, squinting. “I didn’t say I would deliver it.”

Curly remained in place, proffering the package.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Greenlaw reached irritably for the package, but his hand faltered midway. “It’s a funny-looking thing. What is it?”

“Dunno, doctor. Came by messenger.”

“It seems to have been mishandled.”

Curly shrugged.

But Greenlaw still didn't take the package. He leaned toward it, squinting. "It's torn. There's a hole... Look, there's something coming out."

Curly looked down. The corner of the package did indeed have a hole, and a thin stream of brown powder was trickling out.

"What in the world?" Curly said.

Greenlaw took a step back. "It's leaking some kind of powder." His voice rode up a notch. "Oh my Lord. What is it?"

Curly stood rooted to the spot.

"Good God, Curly, drop it! It's anthrax!"

Greenlaw stumbled backward, his face contorted in panic. "It's a terrorist attack—someone call the police! I've been exposed! Oh my God, I've been exposed!"

The administrator stumbled and fell backward on the cobblestones, clawing the ground and springing to his feet, and then he was off and running. Almost immediately, two guards came spilling out of the guard station across the way, one intercepting Greenlaw while the other made for Curly.

"What are you doing?" Greenlaw shrieked. "Keep back! Call 911!"

Curly remained where he was, package in hand. This was something so far outside his experience that his mind seemed to have stopped working.

The guards fell back, Greenlaw at their heels. For a moment, the small courtyard was strangely quiet. Then a shrill alarm went off, deafening in the enclosed space. In less than five minutes, the air was filled with the sound of approaching sirens, culminating in an uproar of activity: police cars, flashing lights, crackling radios, and uniformed men rushing this way and that stringing up yellow biohazard tape and erecting a cordon, megaphones shouting at the growing crowds to back off, while at the same time telling Curly to drop the package and step away, drop the package and step away.

But Curly didn't drop the package and step away. He remained frozen in utter confusion, staring at the thin brown stream that

continued to trickle out of the tear in the package, forming a small pile on the cobbles at his feet.

And now two strange-looking men wearing puffy white suits and hoods with plastic visors were approaching, walking slowly, hands outstretched like something Curly had seen in an old science fiction movie. One gently took Curly by the shoulders while the other slipped the package from his fingers and—with infinite care—placed it in a blue plastic box. The first man led him to one side and began carefully vacuuming him up and down with a funny-looking device, and then they began dressing him, too, in one of the strange plastic suits, all the time telling him in low electronic voices that he was going to be all right, that they were taking him to the hospital for a few tests, that everything would be fine. As they placed the hood over his head, Curly began to feel his mind coming back to life, his body able to move again.

“Scuse me, doctor?” he said to one of the men as they led him off toward a van that had backed through the police cordon and was waiting for him, doors open.

“Yes?”

“My pipe.” He nodded toward the pillbox. “Don’t forget to bring my pipe.”

Chapter 2

Dr. Lauren Wildenstein watched as the “first response” team carried in the blue plastic hazmat container, placing it under the fume hood in her laboratory. The call had come in twenty minutes earlier, and both she and her assistant, Richie, were ready. At first it sounded like it might be the real deal for a change, something that actually fit the profile of a classic bioterror attack—a package sent to a high-profile New York City institution, dribbling brown powder. But on-site testing for anthrax had already come up negative, and Wildenstein knew that this one would almost certainly be another false alarm. In her two years leading the New York City DOHMS Sentinel laboratory, they had received over four hundred suspicious powders to analyze and, thank God, not one had turned out to be a bioterror agent. So far. She glanced at the running tally they kept tacked to the wall: sugar, salt, flour, baking soda, heroin, cocaine, pepper, and dirt, in that order of frequency. The list was a testament to paranoia and too damn many terror alerts.

The delivery team left and she spent a moment staring at the sealed container. Amazing, the consternation a package of powder could cause these days. It had arrived half an hour ago at the museum, and already a guard and a museum administrator had been quarantined, given antibiotics, and were now being treated by mental health services. It seemed the administrator was particularly hysterical.

She shook her head.

“Whaddya think?” came a voice from over her shoulder.
“Terrorist cocktail du jour?”

Wildenstein ignored this. Richie’s work was top-notch, even if his emotional development had been arrested somewhere between the third and the fourth grade.

“Let’s run an X-ray.”

“Rolling.”

The false-color X-ray that popped up on the monitor screen showed the package was full of an amorphous substance, with no

letter or any other objects visible.

“No detonator,” Richie said. “Darn.”

“I’m going to open the container.” Wildenstein broke the hazmat seals and carefully lifted out the package. She noted the crude, childish scrawl, the lack of a return address, the multiple strands of badly tied twine. It seemed almost designed to arouse suspicion. One corner of the package had been abraded by mishandling, and a light brown substance not unlike sand dribbled from it. This was unlike any bioterror agent she had studied. Awkwardly, on account of her heavy gloves, she cut the twine and opened the package, lifting out a plastic bag.

“We’ve been sandbagged!” said Richie with a snort.

“We treat it as hazardous until proven otherwise,” said Wildenstein, although her private opinion was the same as his. Naturally, it was better to err on the side of caution.

“Weight?”

“One point two kilo. For the record, I’m noting that all the biohazard and hazmat alarms under the hood are reading zero.”

Using a scoop, she took a few dozen grains of the substance and distributed them into half a dozen test tubes, sealed and racked them, then removed them from beneath the hood, passing them on to Richie. Without needing to be told, he started the usual set of chemical reagents, testing for a suite.

“Nice having a shitload of sample to work with,” he said with a chuckle. “We can burn it, bake it, dissolve it, and still have enough left over to make a sand castle.”

Wildenstein waited while he deftly did the workups.

“All negative,” he reported at last. “Man, what is this stuff?”

Wildenstein took a second rack of samples. “Do a heat test in an oxidizing atmosphere and vent the gas to the gas analyzer.”

“Sure thing.” Richie took another tube and, sealing it with a vented pipette which led to the gas analyzer, heated the tube slowly over a Bunsen burner. Wildenstein watched, and to her surprise the sample quickly ignited, glowing for a moment before disappearing,

leaving no ash or residue.

“Burn, baby, burn.”

“What do you have, Richie?”

He scrutinized the readout. “Just about pure carbon dioxide and monoxide, trace of water vapor.”

“The sample must have been pure carbon.”

“Gimme a break, boss. Since when does carbon come in the form of brown sand?”

Wildenstein peered at the grit in the bottom of one of the sample tubes. “I’m going to take a look at this stuff under the stereozoom.”

She sprinkled a dozen grains onto a slide and placed it on the microscope stage, turned on the light, and looked through the oculars.

“What do you see?” Richie asked.

But Wildenstein did not answer. She kept looking, dazzled. Under a microscope, the individual grains were not brown at all, but tiny fragments of a glassy substance in myriad colors—blue, red, yellow, green, brown, black, purple, pink. Still looking through the oculars, she picked up a metal spoon, pressed it on one of the grains, and gave a little push. She could hear a faint scritch as the grain scratched the glass.

“What’re you doing?” Richie asked.

Wildenstein rose. “Don’t we have a refractometer around here somewhere?”

“Yeah, a really cheap job dating back to the Middle Ages.” Richie rummaged around in a cabinet and drew out a dusty machine in a yellowed plastic cover. He set it up, plugged it in. “You know how to work this puppy?”

“I think so.”

Using the stereozoom, she plucked a grain of the substance and let it sink into a drop of mineral oil she put on a slide. Then she slid the slide into the reading chamber of the refractometer. After a few false starts, she figured out how to turn the dial and obtain a reading.

She looked up, a smile on her face.

“Just what I suspected. We have an index of refraction of two point four.”

“Yeah? So?”

“There we are. Nailed it.”

“Nailed what, boss?”

She glanced at him. “Richie, what is made of pure carbon, has an index of refraction above two, and is hard enough to cut glass?”

“Diamond?”

“Bravo.”

“You mean, what we’ve got here is a bag of industrial diamond grit?”

“That’s what it would seem.”

Richie removed his hazmat hood, wiped his brow. “That’s a first for me.” He turned, reached for a phone. “I think I’ll put a call in to the hospital, let them know they can stand down from biological alert. From what I heard, that museum administrator actually soiled his drawers.”

Chapter 3

Frederick Watson Collopy, director of the New York Museum of Natural History, felt a prickling of irritation on the back of his neck as he exited the elevator into the museum's basement. It had been months since he'd been down in these subterranean depths, and he wondered why the devil Wilfred Sherman, chairman of the Mineralogy Department, was so insistent on his coming to the mineralogy lab instead of Sherman's coming to Collopy's office on the fifth floor.

He turned a corner at a brisk walk, his shoes scraping the gritty floor, and came to the mineralogy lab door—which was shut. He tried the handle—locked—and in a fresh surge of irritation knocked sharply.

The door was opened almost immediately by Sherman, who just as quickly closed and locked it behind them. The curator looked disheveled, sweaty—not to put too fine a term on it, a wreck. As well he should, thought Collopy. His eye swept the lab and quickly fixed on the offending package itself, soiled and wrinkled, sitting in a double-ziplocked bag on a specimen table next to a stereozoom microscope. Beside it lay a half-dozen white envelopes.

“Dr. Sherman,” he intoned, “the careless way this material was delivered to the museum has caused us major embarrassment. This is nothing short of outrageous. I want the name of the supplier, I want to know why this wasn't handled through proper procurement channels, and I want to know why such valuable material was handled so carelessly and misdelivered in such a way as to cause a panic. As I understand it, industrial-grade diamond grit costs several thousand dollars a pound.”

Sherman didn't answer. He just sweated.

“I can just see the headline in tomorrow's newspaper: Bioterror Scare at the Natural History Museum. I'm not looking forward to reading it. I've just gotten a call from some reporter at the Times—Harriman something or other—and I have to call him back in half an hour with an explanation.”

Sherman swallowed, still saying nothing. A drop of sweat trickled

down his brow and he quickly wiped it away with a handkerchief.

“Well? Do you have an explanation? And is there a reason why you insisted on my coming to your lab?”

“Yes,” Sherman managed to say. He nodded toward the stereozoom. “I wanted you to take a... take a look.”

Collopy got up, went over to the microscope, removed his glasses, and put his eyes over the oculars. A blurry mess leaped into view. “I can’t see a bloody thing.”

“The focus needs adjustment, there.”

Collopy fumbled with the knob, sweeping the specimen in and out of focus as he tried to find the right spot. Finally, he found himself staring at a breathtakingly beautiful array of thousands of brilliantly colored bits and pieces of crystal, backlit like a stained-glass window.

“What is it?”

“A sample of the grit that came in the package.”

Collopy pulled away. “Well? Did you or someone in your department order it?”

Sherman hesitated. “No, we didn’t.”

“Then tell me, Dr. Sherman, how did thousands of dollars’ worth of diamond grit come to be addressed and delivered to your department?”

“I have an explanation—” Sherman stopped. With a shaking hand, he picked up one of the white envelopes. Collopy waited, but Sherman seemed to have frozen up.

“Dr. Sherman?”

Sherman did not respond. He extracted the handkerchief and dabbed his face a second time.

“Dr. Sherman, are you ill?”

Sherman swallowed. “I don’t know how to tell you this.”

Collopy said briskly, “We have a problem, and I’ve now got”—he checked his watch—“only twenty-five minutes to call this fellow

Harriman back. So just go ahead and lay it out for me.”

Sherman nodded dumbly, dabbed yet again at his face. Despite his annoyance, Collopy felt pity for the fellow. In many ways, he was basically a middle-aged kid who never outgrew his rock collection... Suddenly, Collopy realized it wasn't just sweat the man was wiping away—his eyes were leaking tears.

“It's not industrial diamond grit,” Sherman said at last.

Collopy frowned. “Excuse me?”

The curator took a deep breath, seemed to brace himself. “Industrial diamond grit is made from black or brown diamonds of no aesthetic value. Under a microscope, it looks like what you'd expect: dark crystalline particles. But when you look at these under the microscope, you see color.” His voice quavered.

“That's what I saw, yes.”

Sherman nodded. “Tiny fragments and crystals of color, every color in the rainbow. I confirmed that they were indeed diamond, and I asked myself...” His voice faltered.

“Dr. Sherman?”

“I asked myself: how in the world did a sack of diamond grit come to be made up of millions of fragments of fancy color diamonds? Two and a half pounds' worth.”

The lab fell into a profound silence. Collopy felt himself go cold. “I don't understand.”

“This is not diamond grit,” said Sherman all in a rush. “This is the museum's diamond collection.”

“What the devil are you saying?”

“The man who stole our diamonds last month. He must have pulverized them. All of them.” The tears were now flowing freely, but Sherman no longer bothered to wipe them away.

“Pulverized?” Collopy looked around wildly. “How can you pulverize a diamond?”

“With a sledgehammer.”

“But they’re supposed to be the hardest thing in the world.”

“Hard, yes. That doesn’t mean they aren’t brittle.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Many of our diamonds have a unique color. Take the Queen of Narnia, for example. No other diamond has quite that blue color, with hints of violet and green. I was able to identify each tiny fragment. That’s what I’ve been doing—separating them out.”

He took the white envelope in his hand and tipped it out on a sheet of paper lying on the specimen table. A pile of blue grit poured out. He pointed to it.

“The Queen of Narnia.”

He took out another envelope, tipped it over into a purple pile. “The Heart of Eternity.”

One after another he emptied the little envelopes. “The Indigo Ghost. Ultima Thule. The Fourth of July. The Zanzibar Green.”

It was like a steady drumbeat, one pounding blow after another. Collopy stared in horror at the tiny piles of glittering sand.

“This is a sick joke,” he finally said. “Those can’t be the museum’s diamonds.”

“The exact hues of many of these famous diamonds are quantifiable,” Sherman replied. “I have hard data on them. I tested the fragments. They’re diamonds with exactly the right hue. There can be no mistake. There’s nothing else they could be.”

“But surely not all of them,” said Collopy. “He can’t have destroyed them all.”

“That package contained 2.42 pounds of diamond grit. That’s equivalent to about 5,500 carats. Adding in the amount that spilled, the original shipment would have contained roughly 6,000 carats. I added up the carat weights of the diamonds that were stolen...” His voice trailed off.

“Well?” Collopy asked at last, no longer able to contain himself.

“The total weight was 6,042 carats,” Sherman said in a whisper.

A long silence filled the laboratory, the only sound the faint hum of the fluorescent lights. At last Collopy raised his head and looked Sherman in the eye.

“Dr. Sherman,” he began, but his voice cracked and he was forced to start over. “Dr. Sherman. This information must not leave this room.”

Sherman, already pale, went white as a ghost. But after a moment, he nodded silently.

Chapter 4

William Smithback Jr. entered the dark and fragrant confines of the pub known as the Bones and scanned the noisy crowd. It was five o'clock and the place was packed with museum staff, all lubricating themselves after the long and dusty hours spent laboring in the granite pile across the street. Why in the world they all wanted to hang out in a place whose every square inch of wall space was covered with bones, after escaping just such an environment at work, was a mystery to him. These days he himself came to the Bones for one reason only: the forty-year-old single malt that the bartender kept hidden under the bar. At thirty-six dollars a shot, it wasn't exactly a bargain, but it sure beat having your insides corroded by three dollars' worth of Cutty Sark.

He spied the copper-colored hair of his new bride, Nora Kelly, at their usual table in the back. He waved, sauntered over, and struck a dramatic pose.

"But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?" he intoned. Then he kissed the back of her hand briefly, kissed her lips rather more attentively, and took a seat across the table. "How are things?"

"The museum continues to be an exciting place to work."

"You mean that bioterror scare this morning?"

She nodded. "Someone delivered a package for the Mineralogy Department, leaking some kind of powder. They thought it was anthrax or something."

"I heard about that. In fact, brother Bryce filed a story on that today." Bryce Harriman was Smithback's colleague and archrival at the Times, but Smithback had secured himself a little breathing room with some recent—and very dramatic—scoops.

The hangdog waiter came by and stood by the table, silently waiting to take their drink orders.

"I'll take two fingers of the Glen Grant," Smithback said. "The good stuff."

“A glass of white wine, please.”

The waiter shuffled off.

“So it caused a stir?” Smithback asked.

Nora giggled. “You should have seen Greenlaw, the guy who found it. He was so sure he was dying they had to carry him out on a stretcher, protective suit and all.”

“Greenlaw? I don’t know him.”

“He’s the new V.P. for administration. Just hired from Con Ed.”

“So what’d it turn out to be? The anthrax, I mean.”

“Grinding powder.”

Smithback chuckled as he accepted his drink. “Grinding powder. Oh, God, that’s perfect.” He swirled the amber liquid around in the balloon glass and took a sip. “How’d it happen?”

“It seems the package was damaged in transit, and the stuff was dribbling out. A messenger dropped it off with Curly, and Greenlaw just happened by.”

“Curly? The old guy with the pipe?”

“That’s the one.”

“He’s still at the museum?”

“He’ll never leave.”

“How did he take it?”

“In stride, like everything else. He was back in his pillbox a few hours later, like nothing had happened.”

Smithback shook his head. “Why in the world would anyone send a sack of grit by messenger?”

“Beats me.”

He took another sip. “You think it was deliberate?” he asked absently. “Someone trying to freak out the museum?”

“You’ve got a criminal mind.”

“Do they know who sent it?”

“I heard the package didn’t have a return address.”

At this small detail, Smithback grew suddenly interested. He wished he’d called up Harriman’s piece on the Times internal network and read it. “You know how much it costs to send something by messenger in New York City these days? Forty bucks.”

“Maybe it was valuable grit.”

“But then, why no return address? Who was it addressed to?”

“Just the Mineralogy Department, I heard.”

Smithback took another thoughtful sip of the Glen Grant. There was something about this story that set off a journalistic alarm in his head. He wondered if Harriman had gotten to the bottom of it. Not bloody likely.

He extracted his cell. “Mind if I make a call?”

Nora frowned. “If you must.”

Smithback dialed the museum, asked to be put through to mineralogy. He was in luck: someone was still there. He began speaking rapidly. “This is Mr. Humnhmn in the Grmhnmhmn’s office, and I had a quick question: what kind of grinding powder was it that caused the scare this morning?”

“I didn’t catch—”

“Look, I’m in a hurry. The director’s waiting for an answer.”

“I don’t know.”

“Is there anyone there who does?”

“There’s Dr. Sherman.”

“Put him on.”

A moment later, a breathless voice got on. “Dr. Collopy?”

“No, no,” said Smithback easily. “This is William Smithback. I’m a

reporter for the New York Times.”

A silence. Then a very tense “Yes?”

“About that bioterror scare this morning—”

“I can’t help you,” came the immediate response. “I already told everything I know to your colleague, Mr. Harriman.”

“Just a routine follow-up, Dr. Sherman. Mind?”

Silence.

“The package was addressed to you?”

“To the department,” came the terse reply.

“No return address?”

“No.”

“And it was full of grit?”

“That’s right.”

“What kind?”

A hesitation. “Corundum grit.”

“How much is corundum grit worth?”

“I don’t know offhand. Not much.”

“I see. That’s all, thanks.”

He hung up to find Nora looking at him.

“It’s rude to use your cell phone in a pub,” she said.

“Hey, I’m a reporter. It’s my job to be rude.”

“Satisfied?”

“No.”

“A package of grit came to the museum. It was leaking, it freaked someone out. End of story.”

“I don’t know.” Smithback took another long sip of the Glen Grant. “That guy sounded awfully nervous just now.”

“Dr. Sherman? He’s high-strung.”

“He sounded more than high-strung. He sounded frightened.”

He opened his cell phone again, and Nora groaned. “If you start making calls, I’m heading home.”

“Come on, Nora. One more call, then we’ll head over to the Rattlesnake Café for dinner. I gotta make this call now. It’s already after five and I want to catch people before they leave.”

Quickly, he dialed information, got a number, punched it in. “Department of Health and Mental Services?”

After being bounced around a bit, he finally got the lab he wanted.

“Sentinel lab,” came a voice.

“To whom am I speaking?”

“Richard. And to whom am I speaking?”

“Hi, Richard, this is Bill Smithback of the Times. You in charge?”

“I am now. The boss just went home.”

“Lucky for you. Can I ask a few questions?”

“You said you’re a reporter?”

“That’s right.”

“I suppose so.”

“This is the lab that handled that package from the museum this morning?”

“Sure is.”

“What was in it?”

Smithback heard a snort. “Diamond grit.”

“Not corundum?”

“No. Diamond.”

“Did you examine the grit yourself?”

“Yup.”

“What’d it look like?”

“Under coarse examination, like a sack of brown sand.”

Smithback thought for a moment. “How’d you figure out it was diamond grit?”

“By the index of refraction of the particles.”

“I see. And it couldn’t be confused with corundum?”

“No way.”

“You also examined it under a microscope, I assume?”

“Yup.”

“What’d it look like?”

“It was beautiful, like a bunch of little colored crystals.”

Smithback felt a sudden tingling at the nape of his neck. “Colored? What do you mean?”

“Bits and fragments of every color of the rainbow. I had no idea diamond grit was so pretty.”

“That didn’t strike you as odd?”

“A lot of things that are ugly to the human eye look beautiful under the microscope. Like bread mold, for instance—or sand, for that matter.”

“But you said the grit looked brown.”

“Only when blended together.”

“I see. What’d you do with the package?”

“We sent it back to the museum and chalked it up as a false alarm.”

“Thanks.”

Smithback slowly shut the phone. Impossible. It couldn't be.

He looked up to find Nora staring at him, annoyance clear on her face. He reached over and took her hand. “I'm really sorry, but I've got another call to make.”

She crossed her arms. “And I thought we were going to have a nice evening together.”

“One more call. Please. I'll let you listen in. Believe me, this is going to be good.”

Nora's cheeks grew pink. Smithback knew that look: his wife was getting steamed.

Quickly, he dialed the museum again, put the phone on speaker. “Dr. Sherman?”

“Yes?”

“This is Smithback from the Times again.”

“Mr. Smithback,” came the shrill reply, “I've already told you everything I know. Now, if you don't mind, I have a train to catch.”

“I know that what arrived at the museum this morning was not corundum grit.”

Silence.

“I know what it really was.”

More silence.

“The museum's diamond collection.”

In the silence, Nora looked at him sharply.

“Dr. Sherman, I'm coming over to the museum to talk to you. If Dr. Collopy is still around, he would be wise to be there—or, at least, to make himself available by phone. I don't know what you told my colleague Harriman, but you're not going to fob the same stuff off onto me. It's bad enough that the museum allowed its diamond collection—the most valuable in the world—to be stolen. I'm certain the museum trustees wouldn't want a cover-up scandal to follow hard

on the heels of the revelation that the same diamond collection had just been reduced to industrial-strength grinding powder. Are we clear on that, Dr. Sherman?”

It was a very weak and shaky voice that finally issued from the cell phone. “It wasn’t a cover-up, I assure you. It was, ah, just a delay in the announcement.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes. Don’t go anywhere.”

Smithback immediately made another call, to his editor at the Times. “Fenton? You know that piece on the anthrax scare at the museum that Bryce Harriman filed? Better kill that. I’ve got the real story, and it’s a bombshell. Hold the front page for me.”

He shut the phone and looked up. Nora was no longer mad. She was white.

“Diogenes Pendergast,” she whispered. “He destroyed the diamonds?”

Smithback nodded.

“But why?”

“That’s a very good question, Nora. But now, darling, with my infinite apologies, and an IOU for dinner at the Rattlesnake Café, I have to go. I’ve got a couple of interviews to conduct and a story to file before midnight if I’m going to make the national edition. I’m really, really sorry. Don’t wait up for me.”

He rose and gave her a kiss.

“You’re amazing,” she said in an awed voice.

Smithback hesitated, feeling an unaccustomed sensation. It took him a moment to realize he was blushing.

Chapter 5

Dr. Frederick Watson Collopy stood behind the great nineteenth-century leather-topped desk of his corner office in the museum's southeast tower. The huge desk was bare, save for a copy of the morning's New York Times. The newspaper had not been opened. It did not need to be: already, Collopy could see everything he needed to see, on the front page, above the fold, in the largest type the staid Times dared use.

The cat was out of the bag, and it could not be put back in.

Collopy believed that he occupied the greatest position in American science: director of the New York Museum of Natural History. His mind drifted from the subject of the article to the names of his distinguished forebears: Ogilvy, Scott, Throckmorton. His goal, his one ambition, was to add his name to that august registry—and not fall into ignominy like his two immediate predecessors: the late and not-much-lamented Winston Wright or the inept Olivia Merriam.

And yet there, on the front page of the Times, was a headline that might just be his tombstone. He had weathered several bad patches recently, irruptions of scandal that would have felled a lesser man. But he had handled them coolly and decisively—and he would do the same here.

A soft knock came at the door.

"Come in."

The bearded figure of Hugo Menzies, chairman of the Anthropology Department, dressed elegantly and with less than the usual degree of academic rumpledness, entered the room. He silently took a chair as Josephine Rocco, the head of public relations, entered behind him, along with the museum's lawyer, the ironically named Beryl Darling of Wilfred, Spragg and Darling.

Collopy remained standing, watching the three as he stroked his chin thoughtfully. Finally he spoke.

"I've called you here in emergency session, for obvious reasons." He glanced down at the paper. "I assume you've seen the Times?"

His audience nodded in silent assent.

“We made a mistake in trying to cover this up, even briefly. When I took this position as director of the museum, I told myself I would run this place differently, that I wouldn’t operate in the secretive and sometimes paranoid manner of the last few administrations. I believed the museum to be a great institution, one strong enough to survive the vicissitudes of scandal and controversy.”

He paused.

“In trying to play down the destruction of our diamond collection, in seeking to cover it up, I made a mistake. I violated my own principles.”

“An apology to us is all well and good,” said Darling in her usual crisp voice, “but why didn’t you consult me before you made that hasty and ill-considered decision? You must have realized you couldn’t get away with it. This has done serious damage to the museum and made my job that much more difficult.”

Collopy reminded himself this was precisely the reason the museum paid Darling four hundred dollars an hour: she always spoke the unvarnished truth.

He raised a hand. “Point taken. But this is a development I never in my worst nightmares anticipated—finding that our diamonds have been reduced to...” His voice cracked: he couldn’t finish.

There was an uneasy shifting in the room.

Collopy swallowed, began again. “We must take action. We’ve got to respond, and respond now. That is why I’ve asked you to this meeting.”

As he paused, Collopy could hear, coming faintly from Museum Drive below, the shouts and calls of a growing crowd of protesters, along with police sirens and bullhorns.

Rocco spoke up. “The phones in my office are ringing off the hook. It’s nine now, and I think we’ve probably got until ten, maybe eleven at the latest, to make some kind of official statement. In all my years in public relations, I’ve never encountered anything quite like this.”

Menzies shifted in his chair, smoothed his silver hair. “May I?”

Collopy nodded. "Hugo."

Menzies cleared his throat, his intense blue eyes darting to the window and back to Collopy. "The first thing we have to realize, Frederick, is that this catastrophe is beyond 'spinning.' Listen to the crowd out there—the fact that we even considered covering up such a loss has the people up in arms. No: we've got to take the hit, honestly and squarely. Admit our wrong. No more dissembling." He glanced at Rocco. "That's my first point and I hope we're all in agreement on it."

Collopy nodded again. "And your second?"

He leaned forward slightly. "It's not enough to respond. We need to go on the offensive."

"What do you mean?"

"We need to do something glorious. We need to make a fabulous announcement, something that will remind New York City and the world that, despite all this, we're still a great museum. Mount a scientific expedition, perhaps, or embark on some extraordinary research project."

"Won't that look like a rather transparent diversion?" asked Rocco.

"Perhaps to some. But the criticism will last only a day or two, and then we'll be free to build interest and good publicity."

"What kind of project?" Collopy asked.

"I haven't gotten that far."

Rocco nodded slowly. "Perhaps it would work. This event could be combined with a gala party, strictly A-list, the social 'must' of the season. That will mute museum-bashing among the press and politicians, who will naturally want to be invited."

"This sounds promising," Collopy said.

After a moment, Darling spoke. "It's a fine theory. All we lack is the expedition, event, or whatever."

At that moment, Collopy's intercom buzzed. He stabbed at it with irritation. "Mrs. Surd, we're not to be disturbed."

"I know, Dr. Collopy, but... well, this is highly unusual."

“Not now.”

“It requires an immediate response.”

Collopy sighed. “Can’t it wait ten minutes, for heaven’s sake?”

“It’s a bank wire transfer donation of ten million euros for—”

“A gift of ten million euros? Bring it in.”

Mrs. Surd entered, efficient and plump, carrying a paper.

“Excuse me for a moment.” Collopy snatched the paper. “Who’s it from and where do I sign?”

“It’s from a Comte Thierry de Cahors. He’s giving the museum ten million euros to renovate and reopen the Tomb of Senef.”

“The Tomb of Senef? What the devil is that?” Collopy tossed the paper on the desk. “I’ll deal with this later.”

“But it says here, sir, that the funds are waiting in transatlantic escrow and must be either refused or accepted within the hour.”

Collopy resisted an impulse to wring his hands. “We’re awash in bloody restricted funds like this! What we need are general funds to pay the bills. Fax this count whoever and see if you can’t persuade him to make this an unrestricted donation. Use my name with the usual courtesies. We don’t need the money for whatever windmill he’s tilting at.”

“Yes, Dr. Collopy.”

She turned away and Collopy glanced at the group. “Now, I believe Beryl had the floor.”

The lawyer opened her mouth to speak, but Menzies held out a suppressing hand. “Mrs. Surd? Please wait a few minutes before contacting the Count of Cahors.”

Mrs. Surd hesitated, glancing at Collopy for confirmation. The director nodded his confirmation and she left, closing the door behind her.

“All right, Hugo, what’s this about?” Collopy asked.

“I’m trying to remember the details. The Tomb of Senef—it rings

a bell. And, now that I recall, so does the Count of Cahors.”

“Can we move on here?” Collopy asked.

Menzies sat forward suddenly. “Frederick, this is moving on! Think back over your museum history. The Tomb of Senef was an Egyptian tomb on display in the museum from its original opening until, I believe, the Depression, when it was closed.”

“And?”

“If memory serves, it was a tomb stolen and disassembled by the French during the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and later seized by the British. It was purchased by one of the museum’s benefactors and reassembled in the basement as one of the museum’s original exhibits. It must still be there.”

“And who is this Cahors?” Darling asked.

“Napoleon brought an army of naturalists and archaeologists with his army when he invaded Egypt. A Cahors led the archaeological contingent. I imagine this fellow is a descendant.”

Collopy frowned. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“Don’t you see? This is precisely what we’re looking for!”

“A dusty old tomb?”

“Exactly! We make a big announcement of the count’s gift, set an opening date with a gala party and all the trappings, and make a media event out of it.” Menzies looked inquiringly at Rocco.

“Yes,” Rocco said. “Yes, that could work. Egypt is always popular with the general public.”

“Could work? It will work. The beauty of it is that the tomb’s already installed. The Sacred Images exhibition has run its course, it’s time for something new. We could do this in two months—or less.”

“A lot depends on the condition of the tomb.”

“Nevertheless, it’s still in place and ready to go. It might only need to be swept out. Our storage rooms are full of Egyptian odds and ends that we could put in the tomb to round out the exhibition. The count is offering plenty of money for whatever restoration is necessary.”

“I don’t understand,” Darling said. “How could an entire exhibition be forgotten for seventy years?”

“For one thing, it would have been bricked up—that’s often what they did to old exhibits to preserve them. “ Menzies smiled a little sadly. “This museum simply has too many artifacts, and not enough money or curators to tend them. That’s why I’ve lobbied for years now to create a position for a museum historian. Who knows what other secrets sleep in the long-forgotten corners?”

A brief silence settled over the room, broken abruptly as Collopy brought his hand down on his desk. “Let’s do it.” He reached for the phone. “Mrs. Surd? Tell the count to release the money. We’re accepting his terms.”

Chapter 6

Nora Kelly stood in her laboratory, gazing at a large specimen table covered with fragments of ancient Anasazi pottery. The potsherds were of an unusual type that glowed almost golden in the bright lights, a sheen caused by countless mica particles in the original clay. She had collected the sherds during a summertime expedition to the Four Corners area of the Southwest, and now she had arranged them on a huge contour map of the Four Corners, each sherd in the precise geographical location where it had been found.

She stared at the glittering array, once again trying to make sense of it. This was the core of her major research project at the museum: tracing the diffusion of this rare micaceous pottery from its source in southern Utah as it was traded and retraded across the Southwest and beyond. The pottery had been developed by a religious kachina cult that had come up from Aztec Mexico, and Nora believed that—by tracing the spread of the pottery across the Southwest—she could thereby trace the spread of the kachina cult.

But there were so many sherds, and so many C-14 dates, that making all the variables work together was a thorny problem, and she had not even begun to solve it. She stared hard: the answer was there. She just had to find it.

She sighed and took a sip of coffee, glad she had her basement lab as a refuge from the storm raging outside the museum above. Yesterday it had been the anthrax scare, but today was worse—thanks in large part to her husband, Bill, who had a singular knack for stirring up trouble. He had broken the story in the Times this morning that the powder was, in fact, the museum's stolen diamond collection, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, pulverized to dust by the thief. The news had caused an uproar worse than anything Nora could remember. The mayor, cornered by a bevy of television cameras outside his office, had already blasted the museum and called for the immediate removal of its director.

She forced her mind back to the problem of the potsherds. All the lines of diffusion led back to one place: the source of the rare clay at the base of the Kaiparowits plateau of Utah, where it had been mined and fired by the inhabitants of a large cliff dwelling hidden in the canyons. From there, it had been traded to places as far away as

northern Mexico and western Texas. But how? And when? And by whom?

She got up and went to a cabinet, removing the last ziplock bag of potsherds. The lab was as quiet as a tomb, the only sound the faint hiss of the forced-air ducts. Beyond the laboratory itself lay large storage areas: ancient oak cabinets with rippled glass windows, filled with pots, arrowheads, axes, and other artifacts. A faint whiff of paradichlorobenzene wafted in from the Indian mummy storage room next door. She began laying the sherds out on the map, filling in its last blank corner, double-checking the accession number on each sherd as she placed it.

Suddenly she paused. She had heard the creaking-open of the laboratory door and the sound of a soft footfall on the dusty floor. Hadn't she locked it? It was a silly habit, locking the door: but the museum's vast and silent basement, with its dim corridors and its dark storage rooms filled with strange and dreadful artifacts, had always given her the creeps. And she could not forget what had happened to her friend Margo Green just a few weeks earlier in a darkened exhibition hall, two floors above where she stood now.

"Is someone there?" she called out.

A figure materialized from the dimness, first the outlines of a face, then a closely trimmed beard with silvery-white hair—and Nora relaxed. It was only Hugo Menzies, chairman of the Anthropology Department and her immediate boss. He was still a little pale from his recent bout with gallstones, his cheerful eyes rimmed in red.

"Hello, Nora," said the curator, giving her a kindly smile. "May I?"

"Of course."

Menzies perched himself on a stool. "It's so lovely and quiet down here. Are you alone?"

"Yes. How are things up top?"

"The crowd outside is still growing."

"I saw them when I came in."

"It's getting ugly. They're jeering and hectoring the arriving staff and blocking traffic on Museum Drive. And I fear this is just the

beginning. It's one thing when the mayor and governor make pronouncements, but it appears the people of New York have also been aroused. God save us from the fury of the vulgus mobile."

Nora shook her head. "I'm sorry that Bill was the cause—"

Menzies laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Bill was only the messenger. He did the museum a favor in exposing this ill-advised cover-up scheme before it could take hold. The truth would have come out eventually."

"I can't understand why someone would go to the trouble to steal the gems and then destroy them."

Menzies shrugged. "Who knows what goes on in the mind of a deranged individual? It evinces, at the very least, an implacable hatred of the museum."

"What had the museum ever done to him?"

"Only one person can answer that question. But I'm not here to speculate on the criminal's mind. I'm here for a specific reason, and it has to do with what's going on upstairs."

"I don't understand."

"I've just come from a meeting in Dr. Collopy's office. We made a decision, and it involves you."

Nora waited, feeling a creeping sense of alarm.

"Are you familiar with the Tomb of Senef?"

"I've never heard of it."

"Not surprising. Few museum employees have. It was one of the museum's original exhibits, an Egyptian tomb from the Valley of the Kings that was reassembled in these basements. It was closed down and sealed off in the thirties and never reopened."

"And?"

"What the museum needs right now is some positive news, something that will remind everyone that we're still doing good things. A distraction, as it were. That distraction is going to be the Tomb of Senef. We're going to reopen it, and I want you as point person for the project."

“Me? But I put off my research for months to help mount the Sacred Images show!”

An ironic smile played over Menzies’s face. “That’s right, and that’s why I’m asking you to do this. I saw the work you did on Sacred Images. You’re the only one in the department who can pull this off.”

“In how long?”

“Collopy wants it fast-tracked. We’ve got six weeks.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

“We face a real emergency. Finances have been in a sorry state for a long time. And with this new spate of bad publicity, anything could happen.”

Nora fell silent.

“What set this in motion,” Menzies continued gently, “is that we just received ten million euros—thirteen million dollars—to fund this project. Money is no object. We’ll have the unanimous support of the museum, from the board of trustees to all the unions. The Tomb of Senef has remained sealed, so it should be in fairly good condition.”

“Please don’t ask me to do this. Give it to Ashton.”

“Ashton’s no good at controversy. I saw how you handled yourself with those protesters at the Sacred Images opening. Nora, the museum is in a fight for its life. I need you. The museum needs you.”

There was a silence. Nora glanced back over her potsherds with a horribly sinking heart. “I don’t know anything about Egyptology.”

“We’re bringing in a top Egyptologist as a temporary hire to work with you.”

Nora realized there was no escape. She heaved a huge sigh. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“Brava! That’s what I wanted to hear. Now then, we haven’t gotten very far with the idea yet, but the tomb hasn’t been on display in seventy years, so it will obviously need some sprucing up. It’s not enough these days to mount a static exhibition; you need multimedia. And of course, there will be a gala opening, something every New Yorker with social aspirations will have to get a ticket for.”

Nora shook her head. “All this in six weeks?”

“I was hoping you might have some ideas.”

“When do you need them?”

“Right now, I’m afraid. Dr. Collopy has scheduled a press conference in half an hour to announce about the show.”

“Oh, no.” Nora slumped on her stool. “Are you sure special effects will be necessary? I hate computerized window dressing. It distracts from the objects.”

“That is what being a museum means these days, unfortunately. Look at the new Abraham Lincoln library. Yes, on a certain level, it’s a bit vulgar perhaps—but this is the twenty-first century and we’re competing with television and video games. Please, Nora: I need ideas now. The director will be bombarded with questions and he wants to be able to talk about the exhibit.”

Nora swallowed. On the one hand, it made her sick to think of putting off her research yet again, working seventy-hour weeks, never seeing her husband of only a few months. On the other hand, if she was going to do this—and it seemed she had no choice—she wanted to do it well.

“We don’t want anything cheesy,” she said. “No mummies popping up from their sarcophagi. And it’s got to be educational.”

“My feelings exactly.”

Nora thought a moment. “The tomb was robbed, am I right?”

“It was robbed in antiquity, like most Egyptian tombs, probably by the very priests who buried Senef—who, by the way, was not a pharaoh, but vizier and regent to Thutmosis IV.”

Nora digested this. It was, she supposed, a huge honor to be asked to coordinate a major new exhibition—and this one would have exceptionally high visibility. It was intriguing. She found herself being drawn into it, despite herself.

“If you’re looking for something dramatic,” she said, “why not re-create the moment of the robbery itself? We could dramatize the robbers at work—show their fear of being caught, what would happen to them if they were caught—with a voice-over explaining what was

happening, who Senef was, that sort of thing.”

Menzies nodded. “Excellent, Nora.”

Nora felt a mounting excitement. “If done right, with computerized lighting and so forth, it would give visitors an experience they’d never forget. Make history come alive inside the tomb itself.”

“Nora, someday you’ll be director of this museum.”

She blushed. The idea did not displease her.

“I’d been thinking of some sort of sound-and-light show myself. It’s perfect.” With uncharacteristic exuberance, Menzies seized Nora’s hand. “This is going to save the museum. And it will make your career here. As I said, you’ll have all the money and support you’ll need. As for the computer effects, let me manage that side of things—you focus on the objects and displays. Six weeks will be just enough time to get the buzz going, get out the invitations, and work the press. They won’t be able to trash the museum if they’re angling to be invited.”

He glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to prepare Dr. Collopy for the press conference. Thank you so much, Nora.”

He bustled out, leaving Nora alone in the silent laboratory. She turned her eye regretfully to the table she had so carefully arranged with potsherds, and then she started picking them up, one at a time, and returning them to their storage bags.

Chapter 7

Special Agent Spencer Coffey rounded the corner and approached the warden's office, his steel-capped heels making a satisfying tattoo against the polished cement floor. Short, bottle-mustached Agent Rabiner followed, deferentially riding his wake. Coffey paused before the institutional oak door, gave a tap, then opened it without waiting for an invitation.

The warden's secretary, a thin bleach-blonde with old acne scars on her face and a no-bullshit attitude, gave him the once-over. "Yes?"

"Agent Coffey, Federal Bureau of Investigation." He waved his badge. "We've got an appointment, and we're in a hurry."

"I'll tell the warden you're here," she said, her upstate hick accent grating on his nerves.

Coffey glanced at Rabiner and rolled his eyes. He'd already had a run-in with the woman over a dropped connection when he called earlier that day, and now, meeting her in person, he confirmed she was everything he despised, a low-class hayseed who'd clawed her way into a position of semirespectability.

"Agent Coffey and—?" She glanced at Rabiner.

"Special Agent Coffey and Special Agent Rabiner."

The woman picked up the intercom phone with insolent slowness. "Agents Coffey and Rabiner to see you, sir. They say they have an appointment."

She listened for a moment, and then hung up. She waited just long enough to let Coffey know she wasn't in nearly the hurry he was. "Mr. Imhof," she finally said, "will see you."

Coffey started to walk past her desk. Then he paused. "So. How are things down on the farm?"

"Seems to be ruttin' season for hogs," she responded without a pause, not even looking at him.

Coffey continued into the inner office, wondering just what the

bitch meant and whether he'd been insulted or not.

As Coffey shut the door behind them, Warden Gordon Imhof rose from behind a large Formica desk. Coffey hadn't seen him in person before, and found the man far younger than he expected, small and neat, with a goatee and cool blue eyes. He was impeccably dressed and sported a helmet of blow-dried hair. Coffey couldn't quite pigeonhole him. In the old days, wardens came through the ranks; but this fellow looked like he'd gotten some Ph.D. somewhere in correctional facility management and had never felt the satisfying thok! of a nightstick striking human flesh. Still, there was a thinness to the lips that boded well.

Imhof extended his hand to Coffey and Rabiner. "Have a seat."

"Thank you."

"How did the interrogation go?"

"Our case is developing," Coffey said. "If this doesn't fit the federal death penalty statute to a T, I don't know what does. But it's no slam dunk. There are certain complications." He didn't mention that the interrogation had, in fact, gone badly—very badly.

Imhof's face was inscrutable.

"I want to make something clear," Coffey continued. "One of this killer's victims was a colleague and friend of mine, the third most decorated agent in the history of the FBI."

He let that sink in. What he didn't mention was that this victim, Special Agent in Charge Mike Decker, was responsible for a humiliating demotion Coffey had been hit with seven years before, in the wake of the museum killings, and that nothing in his life had satisfied Coffey more than hearing about his death—except the news of who'd done it.

That had been a special moment.

"So you've got a very special prisoner, Mr. Imhof. He's a sociopathic serial killer of the most dangerous kind—murdered at least three people, although our interest in him is restricted to the murder of the federal agent. We're letting the State of New York worry about the others, but we hope by the time they convict we'll already have the prisoner strapped to a gurney with a needle in his arm."

Imhof, listening, inclined his head.

“The prisoner is also an arrogant bastard. I worked with him on a case years ago. He thinks he’s better than everyone else, thinks he’s above the rules. He’s got no respect for authority.”

At the mention of respect, Imhof finally seemed to respond. “If there’s one thing I demand as warden of this institution, it’s respect. Good discipline begins and ends with respect.”

“Exactly,” said Coffey. He decided to follow up this line, see if he could get Imhof to bite. “Speaking of respect, during the interrogation the prisoner had some choice things to say about you.”

Now he could see Imhof getting interested.

“But they don’t bear repeating,” Coffey went on. “Naturally, you and I have learned to rise above such pettiness.”

Imhof leaned forward. “If a prisoner has shown a lack of respect—and I’m not talking about anything personal here, but a lack of respect for the institution in any way—I need to know about it.”

“It was the usual bullshit and I’d hate to repeat it.”

“Nevertheless, I’d like to know.”

Of course, the prisoner had, in fact, said nothing. That had been the problem.

“He referred to you as a beer-swilling Nazi bastard, a Boche, a Kraut, that sort of thing.”

Imhof’s face tightened slightly, and Coffey knew immediately he’d scored a hit.

“Anything else?” the warden asked quietly.

“Very crude stuff, something about the size of your—ah, well, I don’t even recall the details.”

There was a frosty silence. Imhof’s goatee quivered slightly.

“As I said, it was all bullshit. But it points out an important fact: the prisoner hasn’t seen the wisdom of cooperating. And you know why? Everything stays the same for him whether he answers our questions or not, whether he shows respect for you or the institution

or not. That's got to change. He has to learn that his wrong choices have consequences. And another thing: he's got to be kept in total, utter isolation. He can't be allowed to pass any messages to the outside. There have been allegations that he might be in league with a brother, still on the lam. So no phone calls, no more meetings with his lawyer, total blackout of communication with the outside world. We wouldn't want any further, ah, collateral damage to occur due to lack of vigilance. Do you understand what I mean, Warden?"

"I certainly do."

"Good. He's got to be made to see the advantages of cooperation. I'd love to work him over with a rubber hose and a cattle prod—he deserves nothing less—but unfortunately that's not possible, and we sure as hell don't want to do anything that could come back to haunt us at the trial. He may be crazy, but he's not dumb. You can't give a guy like that an opening. He's got enough money to dig up Johnnie Cochran and hire him for the defense."

Coffey stopped talking. Because for the first time, Imhof had smiled. And something about the look in the man's blue eyes chilled Coffey.

"I understand your problem, Agent Coffey. The prisoner must be shown the value of respect. I'll see to it personally."

Chapter 8

On the morning appointed for opening the sealed Tomb of Senef, Nora arrived in Menzies's capacious office to find him sitting in his usual wing chair, in conversation with a young man. They both rose as she came in.

"Nora," he said. "This is Dr. Adrian Wicherly, the Egyptologist I mentioned to you. Adrian, this is Dr. Nora Kelly."

Wicherly turned to her with a smile, a thatch of untidy brown hair the only eccentricity in his otherwise perfectly dressed and groomed person. At a glance, Nora took in the understated Savile Row suit, the fine wing tips, the club tie. Her sweep came to rest on an extraordinarily handsome face: dimpled cheeks, flashing blue eyes, and perfect white teeth. He was, she thought, no more than thirty.

"Delighted to meet you, Dr. Kelly," he said in an elegant Oxbridge accent. He clasped her hand gently, blessing her with another dazzling smile.

"A pleasure. And please call me Nora."

"Of course. Nora. Forgive my formality—my stuffy upbringing has left me rather hamstrung this side of the pond. I just want to say how smashing it is to be here, working on this project."

Smashing. Nora suppressed a smile—Adrian Wicherly was almost a caricature of the dashing young Brit, of a type she didn't think even existed outside P. G. Wodehouse novels.

"Adrian comes to us with some impressive credentials," Menzies said. "D.Phil. from Oxford, directed the excavation of the tomb KV 42 in the Valley of the Kings, university professor of Egyptology at Cambridge, author of the monograph *Pharaohs of the XX Dynasty*."

Nora looked at Wicherly with fresh respect. He was amazingly young for an archaeologist of such stature. "Very impressive."

Wicherly put on a self-deprecating face. "A lot of academic rubbish, really."

"It's hardly that." Menzies glanced at his watch. "We're meeting

someone from the Maintenance Department at ten. As I understand it, nobody knows quite precisely where the Tomb of Seneferu is anymore. The one certainty is that it was bricked up and has been inaccessible ever since. We're going to have to break our way in."

"How intriguing," said Wicherly. "I feel rather like Howard Carter."

They descended in an old brass elevator, which creaked and groaned its way to the basement. They emerged in the Maintenance Section and threaded a complex path through the machine shop and carpentry, at last arriving at the open door of a small office. Inside, a small man sat at a desk, poring over a thick press of blueprints. He rose as Menzies rapped on the door frame.

"I'd like to introduce you both to Mr. Seamus McCorkle," said Menzies. "He probably knows more about the layout of the museum than anyone alive."

"Which still isn't saying much," said McCorkle. He was an elvish man in his early fifties with a fine Celtic face and a high, whistling voice. He pronounced the final word *mitch*.

After completing the introductions, Menzies turned back to McCorkle. "Have you found our tomb?"

"I believe so." McCorkle nodded at the slab of old blueprints. "It's not easy, finding things in this old pile."

"Why ever not?" Wicherly asked.

McCorkle began rolling up the top blueprint. "The museum consists of thirty-four interconnected buildings, with a footprint of more than six acres, over two million square feet of space, and eighteen miles of corridors—and that's not even counting the sub-basement tunnels, which no one's ever surveyed or diagrammed. I once tried to figure out how many rooms there were in this joint, gave up when I hit a thousand. It's been under constant construction and renovation for every single one of its hundred and forty years. That's the nature of a museum—collections get moved around, rooms get joined together, others get split apart and renamed. And a lot of these changes are made on the fly, without blueprints."

"But surely they couldn't lose an entire Egyptian tomb!" said Wicherly.

McCorkle laughed. "That would be difficult, even for this museum. It's finding the entrance that might be tricky. It was bricked up in 1935 when they built the connecting tunnel from the 81st Street subway station." He tucked the blueprints under his arm and picked up an old leather bag that lay on his desk. "Shall we?"

"Lead the way," said Menzies.

They set off along a puke-green corridor, past maintenance rooms and storage areas, through a heavily trafficked section of the basement. As they went along, McCorkle gave a running account. "This is the metal shop. This is the old physical plant, once home to the ancient boilers, now used to store the collection of whale skeletons. Jurassic dinosaur storage... Cretaceous... Oligocene mammals... Pleistocene mammals... dugongs and manatees..."

The storage areas gave way to laboratories, their shiny, stainless-steel doors in contrast to the dingy corridors, lit with caged lightbulbs and lined with rumbling steam pipes.

They passed through so many locked doors Nora lost count. Some were old and required keys, which McCorkle selected from a large ring. Other doors, part of the museum's new security system, he opened by swiping a magnetic card. As they moved deeper into the fabric of the building, the corridors became progressively empty and silent.

"I daresay this place is as vast as the British Museum," said Wicherly.

McCorkle snorted in contempt. "Bigger. Much bigger."

They came to an ancient set of riveted metal doors, which McCorkle opened with a large iron key. Darkness yawned beyond. He hit a switch and illuminated a long, once-elegant corridor lined with dingy frescoes. Nora squinted: they were paintings of a New Mexico landscape, with mountains, deserts, and a multistoried Indian ruin she recognized as Taos Pueblo.

"Fremont Ellis," said Menzies. "This was once the Hall of the Southwest. Shut down since the forties."

"These are extraordinary," said Nora.

"Indeed. And very valuable."

“They’re rather in need of curation,” said Wicherly. “That’s a rather nasty stain, there.”

“It’s a question of money,” Menzies said. “If our count hadn’t stepped forward with the necessary grant, the Tomb of Senef would probably have been left to sleep for another seventy years.”

McCorkle opened another door, revealing another dim hall turned into storage, full of shelves covered with beautifully painted pots. Old oaken cabinets stood against the walls, fronted with rippled glass, revealing a profusion of dim artifacts.

“The Southwest collections,” McCorkle said.

“I had no idea,” said Nora, amazed. “These should be available for study.”

“As Adrian pointed out, they need to be curated first,” Menzies said. “Once again, a question of money.”

“It’s not only money,” McCorkle added, with a strange, pinched expression on his face.

Nora exchanged glances with Wicherly. “I’m sorry?” she asked.

Menzies cleared his throat. “I think what Seamus means is that the, ah, first Museum Beast killings happened in the vicinity of the Hall of the Southwest.”

In the silence that followed, Nora made a mental note to have a look at these collections later—preferably, in the company of a large group. Maybe she could write a grant to see them moved to updated storage.

Another door gave way to a smaller room, lined floor-to-ceiling with black metal drawers. Half hidden behind the drawers were ancient posters and announcements from the twenties and thirties, with art deco lettering and images of Gibson Girls. In an earlier era, it must have been an antechamber of sorts. The room smelled of paradichlorobenzene and something bad—like old beef jerky, Nora decided.

At the far end, a great dim hall opened up. In the reflected light, she could see that its walls were covered with frescoes of the pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx as they had appeared when first built.

“Now we’re approaching the old Egyptian galleries,” McCorkle said.

They entered the vast hall. It had been turned into storage space: shelving was covered in transparent plastic sheets, which were in turn overlaid with dust.

McCorkle unrolled the blueprints, squinted at them in the dim light. “If my estimations are correct, the entrance to the tomb was in what is now the annex, at the far end.”

Wicherly went to one shelf, lifted the plastic. Beneath, Nora could make out metal shelves crowded with pottery vessels, gilded chairs and beds, headrests, canopic jars, and smaller figurines in alabaster, faience, and ceramic.

“Good Lord, this is one of the finest collections of ushabtis I’ve ever seen.” Wicherly turned excitedly to Nora. “Why, there’s enough material here alone to fill up the tomb twice over.” He picked up an ushabti and turned it over with reverence. “Old Kingdom, II Dynasty, reign of the pharaoh Hetepsekhemwy.”

“Dr. Wicherly, the rules about handling objects...” said McCorkle, a warning note in his voice.

“It’s quite all right,” said Menzies. “Dr. Wicherly is an Egyptologist. I’ll take responsibility.”

“Of course,” said McCorkle, a little put out. Nora had the feeling that McCorkle took a kind of proprietary interest in these old collections. They were his, in a way, as he was one of the few people ever to see them.

Wicherly went from one shelf to the next, his mouth practically watering. “Why, they even have a Neolithic collection from the Upper Nile! Good Lord, take a look at this ceremonial thatof!” He held up a foot-long stone knife, flaked from gray flint.

McCorkle cast an annoyed glance at Wicherly. The archaeologist laid the knife back in its place with the utmost care, then reshrouded it in plastic.

They came to another iron-bound door, which McCorkle had some difficulty opening, trying several keys before finding the correct one. The door groaned open at last, the hinges shedding clouds of rust.

Beyond lay a small room filled with sarcophagi made of painted wood and cartonnage. Some were without lids, and inside, Nora could make out the individual mummies—some wrapped, some unwrapped.

“The mummy room,” said McCorkle.

Wicherly rushed in ahead of the rest. “Good heavens, there must be a hundred in here!” He swept a plastic sheet aside, exposing a large wooden sarcophagus. “Look at this!”

Nora went over and peered at the mummy. The linen bandages had been ripped from its face and chest, the mouth was open, the black lips shriveled and drawn back as if crying out in protest at the violation. In its chest stood a gaping hole, the sternum and ribs torn out.

Wicherly turned toward Nora, eyes bright. “Do you see?” he said in an almost reverential whisper. “This mummy was robbed. They tore off the linen to get at precious amulets hidden in the wrappings. And there—where that hole is—was where a jade and gold scarab beetle had been placed on the chest. The symbol of rebirth. Gold was considered the flesh of the gods, because it never tarnished. They ripped it open to take it.”

“This can be the mummy we put in the tomb,” Menzies said. “The idea—Nora’s idea—was that we show the tomb as it appeared while being robbed.”

“How perfect,” said Wicherly, turning a brilliant smile to Nora.

“I believe,” McCorkle interrupted, “that the tomb entrance was against that wall.” Dropping his bag on the floor, he pulled the plastic sheeting away from the shelves covering the far wall, exposing pots, bowls, and baskets, all filled with black shriveled objects.

“What’s that inside?” Nora asked.

Wicherly went over to examine the objects. After a silence, he straightened up. “Preserved food. For the afterlife. Bread, antelope joints, fruits and vegetables, dates—preserved for the pharaoh’s journey to the afterworld.”

They heard a growing rumble coming through the walls, followed by a muffled squeal of metal, then silence.

“The Central Park West subway,” McCorkle explained. “The 81st

Street station is very close.”

“We’ll have to find some way to dampen that sound,” Menzies said. “It destroys the mood.”

McCorkle grunted. Then he removed an electronic device from the bag and aimed it at the newly exposed wall, turned, aimed again. Then he pulled out a piece of chalk, made a mark on the wall. Taking a second device from his shirt pocket, he laid it against the wall and slid it across slowly, taking readings as he went.

Then he stepped back. “Bingo. Help me move these shelves.”

They began shifting the objects to shelves on the other walls. When the wall was at last bare, McCorkle pulled the shelf supports from the crumbling plaster with a set of pliers and put them to one side.

“Ready for the moment of truth?” McCorkle asked, a gleam in his eye, good humor returning.

“Absolutely,” said Wicherly.

McCorkle removed a long spike and hammer from his bag, positioned the spike on the wall, gave it a sharp blow, then another. The sounds echoed in the confined space and plaster began falling in sheets, exposing courses of brick. He continued to drive the spike in, dust rising... and then suddenly the spike slid in to the hilt. McCorkle rotated it, giving it a few side blows with the hammer, loosening the brick. A few more deft blows knocked free a large chunk of brickwork, leaving a black rectangle. He stepped back.

As he did so, Wicherly darted forward. “Forgive me if I claim explorer’s privilege.” He turned back with his most charming smile. “Any objections?”

“Be our guest,” said Menzies. McCorkle frowned but said nothing.

Wicherly took his flashlight and shined it into the hole, pressing his face to the gap. A long silence ensued, interrupted by the rumble of another subway train.

“What do you see?” asked Menzies at last.

“Strange animals, statues, and gold—everywhere the glint of gold.”

“What in heck?” said McCorkle.

Wicherly glanced back at him. “I was being facetious—quoting what Howard Carter said when he first peered into King Tut’s tomb.”

McCorkle’s lips tightened. “If you’ll step aside, please, I’ll have this open in a moment.”

McCorkle stepped back up to the gap, and with a series of expertly aimed blows of the spike, loosened several rows of bricks. In less than ten minutes, he had opened a hole big enough to step through. He disappeared inside, came back out a moment later.

“The electricity isn’t working, as I suspected. We’ll have to use our flashlights. I’m required to lead the way,” he said with a glance at Wicherly. “Museum regulations. Might be hazards in there.”

“The mummy from the Black Lagoon, perhaps,” said Wicherly with a laugh and a glance at Nora.

They stepped carefully inside, then stopped to reconnoiter. In the glow of their flashlight beams, a great stone threshold was visible, and beyond, a descending staircase carved out of rough limestone blocks.

McCorkle moved toward the first step, hesitated, then gave a slightly nervous chuckle. “Ready, ladies and gents?”

Chapter 9

Captain of Homicide Laura Hayward stood silently in her office, looking at the untidy forest that seemed to sprout from her desk, from every chair, and to spill over to the floor—chaotic heaps of papers, photographs, tangles of colored string, CDs, yellowing telex sheets, labels, envelopes. The outward disarray, she mused, was a perfect mirror of her inner state of mind.

Her beautiful layout of evidence against Special Agent Pendergast, with all its accusatory paraphernalia of colored strings, photos, and labels, was no more. It had fit together so well. The evidence had been subtle but clean, convincing, utterly consistent. An out-of-the-way spot of blood, some microscopic fibers, a few strands of hair, a knot tied in a certain way, the chain of ownership of a murder weapon. The DNA tests didn't lie, the forensics didn't lie, the autopsies didn't lie. They all pointed to Pendergast. The case against him was that good.

Maybe too good. And that, in a nutshell, was the problem.

A tentative knock came at the door and she turned to see the figure of Glen Singleton, local precinct captain, hovering outside. He was in his late forties; tall, with the sleek, efficient movements of a swimmer, a long face, and an aquiline profile. He wore a charcoal suit that was far too expensive and well cut for an NYPD captain, and every other week he dropped \$120 at the barbershop in the lobby of the Carlyle to have his salt-and-pepper hair trimmed to perfection. But these were signs of personal fastidiousness, not a cop on the take. And despite the sartorial affectations, he was a damned good cop, one of the most decorated on active duty in the force.

"Laura, may I?" He smiled, displaying an expensive row of perfect teeth.

"Sure, why not?"

"We missed you at the departmental dinner last night. Did you have a conflict?"

"A conflict? No, nothing like that."

“Really? Then I can’t understand why you’d pass up a chance to eat, drink, and be merry.”

“I don’t know. I guess I wasn’t really in the mood to be merry.”

There was an awkward silence while Singleton looked around for an empty chair.

“Sorry about the mess. I was just doing...” Her voice trailed off.

“What?”

Hayward shrugged.

“That’s what I was afraid of.” Singleton hesitated briefly, seemed to come to some decision, then shut the door behind him and stepped forward.

“This isn’t like you, Laura,” he said in a low voice.

So it’s going to be like that, thought Hayward.

“I’m your friend, and I’m not going to beat around the bush,” he went on. “I have a pretty good idea what you were ‘just doing,’ and you’re asking for trouble by doing it.”

Hayward waited.

“You developed the case in textbook fashion. You handled it perfectly. So why are you beating yourself up about it now?”

She gazed steadily at Singleton for a moment, trying to control the surge of anger that she knew was directed more at herself than him.

“Why? Because the wrong man’s in jail. Agent Pendergast didn’t murder Torrance Hamilton, he didn’t murder Charles Duchamp, and he didn’t murder Michael Decker. His brother, Diogenes, is the real murderer.”

Singleton sighed. “Look. It’s clear that Diogenes stole the museum’s diamonds and kidnapped Viola Maskelene. There are statements from Lieutenant D’Agosta, that gemologist, Kaplan, and Maskelene herself to that effect. But that doesn’t make him a murderer. You have absolutely no proof of that. On the other hand, you’ve done a great job proving Agent Pendergast did commit those murders. Let it go.”

“I did the job I was supposed to do, and that’s the problem. I was set up. Pendergast was framed.”

Singleton frowned. “I’ve seen plenty of frame jobs in my career, but for this to work, it would have to have been impossibly sophisticated.”

“D’Agosta told me all along that Diogenes Pendergast was framing his brother. Diogenes collected all the physical evidence he needed during Pendergast’s convalescence in Italy—blood, hair, fibers, everything. D’Agosta insisted Diogenes was alive; that he was the kidnapper of Viola Maskelene; that he was behind the diamond theft. He was right about those things, and it makes me think he might be right about everything else.”

“D’Agosta messed up big-time!” Singleton snapped. “He betrayed my trust, and yours. I’ve no doubt that the disciplinary trial will confirm his dismissal from the force. You really want to tie your wagon to that star?”

“I want to tie my wagon to the truth. I’m responsible for putting Pendergast on trial for his life, and I’m the only one who can undo it.”

“The only way to do that is to prove somebody else is the murderer. Do you have a single shred of evidence against Diogenes?”

Hayward frowned. “Margo Green described her assailant as—”

“Margo Green was attacked in a darkened room. Her testimony would never hold up.” Singleton hesitated. “Look, Laura,” he said in a gentler voice. “Let’s not bullshit each other here. I know what you’re going through. Hooking up with someone on the force is never easy. Breaking up with them is even harder. And with Vincent D’Agosta in the middle of this case, I don’t wonder you feel a touch of—”

“D’Agosta and I are ancient history,” Laura interrupted. “I don’t appreciate that insinuation. And for that matter, I don’t appreciate this visit of yours.”

Singleton picked up a pile of papers from the guest chair, placed them on the floor, and sat down. He bowed his head, propped his elbows on his knees, sighed, then looked up.

“Laura, “ he said, “you’re the youngest female homicide captain in the history of the NYPD. You’re twice as good as any man at your level. Commissioner Rocker loves you. The mayor loves you. Your

own people love you. You're going to be commissioner someday—you're that good. I didn't come here at anyone's behest, I came here on my own. To warn you that you've run out of time on this. The FBI is moving ahead with their case against Pendergast. They think he killed Decker, and they aren't interested in inconsistencies. What you've got is a hunch, nothing more... and it's not worth throwing away your career on a hunch. Because that's what will happen if you go up against the FBI on this—and lose."

She looked at him steadily, took a deep breath. "So be it."

Chapter 10

The small group descended the dust-laden staircase of the Tomb of Senef, their shoes leaving prints as in a coating of fresh snow.

Wicherly paused, shining his light around. “Ah. This is what the Egyptians called the God’s First Passage along the Sun’s Path.” He turned toward Nora and Menzies. “Are you interested, or will I be making a bore of myself?”

“By all means,” said Menzies. “Let’s have the tour.”

Wicherly’s teeth gleamed in the dim light. “The problem is, much of the meaning of these ancient tombs still eludes us. They’re easy enough to date, though—this seems a fairly typical New Kingdom tomb, I’d say late XVIIIth Dynasty.”

“Right on target,” said Menzies. “Senef was the vizier and regent to Thutmosis IV.”

“Thank you.” Wicherly absorbed the compliment with evident satisfaction. “Most of these New Kingdom tombs had three parts—an outer, middle, and inner tomb, divided into a total of twelve chambers, which together represented the passage of the Sun God through the underworld during the twelve hours of night. The pharaoh was buried at sunset, and his soul accompanied the Sun God on his solar barque as he made the perilous journey through the underworld toward his glorious rebirth at dawn.”

He shone his light ahead, illuminating a dim portal at the far end. “This staircase would have been filled with rubble, ending in a sealed door.”

They continued descending the staircase, at last reaching a massive doorway topped by a lintel carved with a huge Eye of Horus. Wicherly paused, shining his light on the Eye and the hieroglyphics surrounding it.

“Can you read these hieroglyphics?” asked Menzies.

Wicherly grinned. “I make a pretty good show of it. It’s a curse.” He winked slyly at Nora. “To any who cross this threshold, may

Ammut swallow his heart.”

There was a short silence.

McCorkle issued a high-pitched chuckle. “That’s all?”

“To the ancient tomb robber,” said Wicherly, “that would be enough—that’s a heck of a curse to an ancient Egyptian.”

“Who is Ammut?” Nora asked.

“The Swallower of the Damned.” Wicherly pointed his flashlight on a dim painting on the far wall, depicting a monster with a crocodilian head, the body of a leopard, and the grotesque hindquarters of a hippo, squatting on the sand, mouth open, about to devour a row of human hearts. “Evil words and deeds made the heart heavy, and after death Anubis weighed your heart on a balance scale against the Feather of Maat. If your heart weighed more than the feather, the baboon-headed god, Thoth, tossed it to the monster Ammut to eat. Ammut journeyed into the sands of the west to defecate, and that’s where you’d end up if you didn’t lead a good life—a shite, baking in the heat of the Western Desert.”

“That’s more than I needed to hear, thank you, Doctor,” said McCorkle.

“Robbing a pharaoh’s tomb must have been a terrifying experience for an ancient Egyptian. The curses put on any who entered the tomb were very real to them. To cancel the power of the dead pharaoh, they didn’t just rob the tomb, they destroyed it, smashing everything. Only by destroying the objects could they disperse their malevolent power.”

“Fodder for the exhibit, Nora,” Menzies murmured.

After the briefest hesitation, McCorkle stepped across the threshold, and the rest followed.

“The God’s Second Passage,” Wicherly said, shining his light around at the inscriptions. “The walls are covered with inscriptions from the Reunupertemhru, the Egyptian Book of the Dead.”

“Ah! How interesting!” Menzies said. “Read us a sample, Adrian.”

In a low voice, Wicherly began to intone:

The Regent Senef, whose word is truth, saith: Praise and thanksgiving be unto thee, Ra, O thou who rollest on like unto gold, thou Illuminer of the Two Lands on the day of thy birth. Thy mother brought thee forth on her hand, and thou didst light up with splendor the circle which is traveled over by the Disk. O Great Light who rollest across Nu, thou dost raise up the generations of men from the deep source of thy waters...

“It’s an invocation to Ra, the Sun God, by the deceased, Senef. It’s pretty typical of the Book of the Dead.”

“I’ve heard about the Book of the Dead,” Nora said, “but I don’t know much about it.”

“It was basically a group of magical invocations, spells, and incantations. It helped the dead make the dangerous journey through the underworld to the Field of Reeds—the ancient Egyptian idea of heaven. People waited in fear during that long night after the burial of the pharaoh, because if he buggered up somehow down in the underworld and wasn’t reborn, the sun would never rise again. The dead king had to know the spells, the secret names of the serpents, and all kinds of other arcane knowledge to finish the journey. That’s why it’s all written on the walls of his tomb—the Book of the Dead was a set of crib notes to eternal life.”

Wicherly chuckled, shining his beam over four registers of hieroglyphics painted in red and white. They stepped toward them, raising clouds of deepening gray dust. “There’s the First Gate of the Dead,” he went on. “It shows the pharaoh getting into the solar barque and journeying into the underworld, where he’s greeted by a crowd of the dead... Here in Gate Four they’ve encountered the dreaded Desert of Sokor, and the boat magically becomes a serpent to carry them across the burning sands... And this! This is very dramatic: at midnight, the soul of the Sun God Ra unites with his corpse, represented by the mummified figure—”

“Pardon my saying so, Doctor,” McCorkle broke in, “but we’ve still got eight rooms to go.”

“Right, of course. So sorry.”

They proceeded to the far end of the chamber. Here, a dark hole revealed a steep staircase plunging into blackness. “This passage would also have been filled with rubble,” Wicherly said. “To hinder robbers.”

“Be careful,” McCorkle muttered as he led the way.

Wicherly turned to Nora and held out a well-manicured hand.
“May I?”

“I think I can handle it,” she said, amused at the old-world courtesy. As she watched Wicherly descend with excessive caution, his beautifully polished shoes heavily coated with dust, she decided that he was far more likely to slip and break his neck than she was.

“Be careful!” Wicherly called out to McCorkle. “If this tomb follows the usual plan, up ahead is the well.”

“The well?” McCorkle’s voice floated back.

“A deep pit designed to send unwary tomb robbers to their death. But it was also a way to keep water from flooding the tomb, during those rare periods when the Valley of the Kings flash-flooded.”

“Even if it remains intact, the well will surely be bridged over,” Menzies said. “Recall that this was once an exhibit.”

They moved forward cautiously, their beams finally revealing a rickety wooden bridge spanning a pit at least fifteen feet deep. McCorkle, gesturing for them to remain behind, examined the bridge carefully with his light, then advanced out onto it. A sudden crack! caused Nora to jump. McCorkle grabbed desperately for the railing. But it was merely the sound of settling wood, and the bridge held.

“It’s still safe,” said McCorkle. “Cross one at a time.”

Nora walked gingerly across the narrow bridge. “I can’t believe this was once part of an exhibit. How did they ever install a well like this in the sub-basement of the museum?”

“It must have been cut into the Manhattan bedrock,” Menzies said from behind. “We’ll have to bring this up to code.”

On the far side of the bridge, they passed over another threshold. “Now we’re in the middle tomb,” said Wicherly. “There would have been another sealed door here. What marvelous frescoes! Here’s an image of Senef meeting the gods. And more verses from the Book of the Dead.”

“Any more curses?” Nora asked, glancing at another Eye of Horus painted prominently above the once-sealed door.

Wicherly shone his light toward it. “Hmmm. I’ve never seen an inscription like this before. The place which is sealed. That which lieth down in the closed place is reborn by the Ba-soul which is in it; that which walketh in the closed space is dispossessed of the Ba-soul. By the Eye of Horus I am delivered or damned, O great god Osiris.”

“Sure sounds like another curse to me,” said McCorkle.

“I would guess it’s merely an obscure quotation from the Book of the Dead. The bloody thing runs to two hundred chapters and nobody’s figured all of it out.”

The tomb now opened up onto a stupendous hall, with a vaulted roof and six great stone pillars, all densely covered with hieroglyphics and frescoes. It seemed incredible to Nora that this huge, ornate space had been asleep in the bowels of the museum for more than half a century, forgotten by almost all.

Wicherly turned, playing his light across the extensive paintings. “This is rather extraordinary. The Hall of the Chariots, which the ancients called the Hall of Repelling Enemies. This was where all the war stuff the pharaoh needed in the afterlife would have been stored—his chariot, bows and arrows, horses, swords, knives, war club and staves, helmet, leather armor.”

His beam paused at a frieze depicting beheaded bodies laid out by the hundreds on the ground, their heads lying in rows nearby. The ground was splattered with blood, and the ancient artist had added such realistic details as lolling tongues.

They moved through a long series of passageways until they came to a room that was smaller than the others. A large fresco on one side showed the same scene of weighing the heart depicted earlier, only much larger. The hideous, slaving form of Ammut squatted nearby.

“The Hall of Truth,” Wicherly said. “Even the pharaoh was judged, or in this case, Senef, who was almost as powerful as a pharaoh.”

McCorkle grunted, then disappeared into the next chamber, and the rest followed. It was another spacious room with a vaulted ceiling, painted with a night sky full of stars, the walls dense with hieroglyphics. An enormous granite sarcophagus sat in the middle, empty. The walls on each side were interrupted by four black doors.

“This is an extraordinary tomb,” said Wicherly, shining the light

around. "I had no idea. When you called me, Dr. Menzies, I thought it would be something small but charming. This is stupendous. Where in the world did the museum get it?"

"An interesting story," Menzies replied. "When Napoleon conquered Egypt in 1798, one of his prizes was this tomb, which he had disassembled, block by block, to take back to France. But when Nelson defeated the French in the Battle of the Nile, a Scottish naval captain finagled the tomb for himself and reassembled it at his castle in the Highlands. In the nineteenth century, his last descendant, the 7th Baron of Rattray, finding himself strapped for cash, sold it to one of the museum's early benefactors, who had it shipped across the Atlantic and installed while they were building the museum."

"The baron let go of one of England's national treasures, I should say."

Menzies smiled. "He received a thousand pounds for it."

"Worse and worse! May Ammut swallow the greedy baron's heart for selling the ruddy thing!" Wicherly laughed, casting his flashing blue eyes on Nora, who smiled politely. His attentiveness was becoming obvious, and he seemed not at all discouraged by the wedding band on her finger.

McCorkle began to tap his foot impatiently.

"This is the burial chamber," Wicherly began, "which the ancients called the House of Gold. Those antechambers would be the Ushabti Room; the Canopic Room, where all the pharaoh's preserved organs were stored in jars; the Treasury of the End; and the Resting Place of the Gods. Remarkable, isn't it, Nora? What fun we'll have!"

Nora didn't answer immediately. She was thinking about just how massive the tomb was, and how dusty, and how much work lay ahead of them.

Menzies must have been thinking the same thing, because he turned to her with a smile that was half eager, half rueful.

"Well, Nora," he said. "It should prove an interesting six weeks."

Chapter 11

Gerry Fecteau slammed the door to solitary 44 hard, causing a deafening boom throughout the third floor of Herkmoor Correctional Facility 3. He smirked and winked at his companion as they paused outside the door, listening while the sound echoed through the vast cement spaces before dying slowly away.

The prisoner in 44 was a big mystery. All the guards were talking about him. He was important, that much was clear: FBI agents had come to visit him several times and the warden had taken a personal interest. But what most impressed Fecteau was the tight lid on information. For most new prisoners, it didn't take long for the rumor mill to grind out the accusation, the crime, the gory details. But in this case, nobody even knew the prisoner's name, let alone his crime. He was referred to simply by a single letter: A.

On top of that, the man was scary. True, he wasn't physically imposing: tall and slender with skin so pale it looked like he might have been born in solitary. He rarely spoke, and when he did, you had to lean forward to hear him. No, it wasn't that. It was the eyes. In his twenty-five years in corrections, Fecteau had never before seen eyes that were so utterly cold, like two glittering silvery chips of dry ice, so far below zero they just about smoked.

Christ, it gave Fecteau a chill just thinking about them.

There was no doubt in Fecteau's mind this prisoner had committed a truly heinous crime. Or series of crimes, a Jeffrey Dahmer type, a cold-blooded serial killer. He looked that scary. That's why it gave Fecteau such satisfaction when the order came down that the prisoner was to be moved to solitary 44. Nothing more needed to be said. It was where they sent the hard cases, the ones who needed softening up. Not that solitary 44 was any worse than the other cells in Herkmoor 3 Solitary—all the cells were identical: metal cot, toilet with no seat, sink with only cold running water. What made solitary 44 special, so useful in breaking a prisoner, was the presence of the inmate in solitary 45. The drummer.

Fecteau and his partner, Benjy Doyle, stood on either side of the cell door, making no noise, waiting for the drummer to start up again. He'd paused, as he always did for a few minutes when a new prisoner

was installed. But the pause never lasted long.

Then, as if on schedule, Fecteau heard a faint soft-shoe shuffle start up again inside solitary 45. This was followed by the popping sound of lips, and then a low tattoo of fingers drumming against the metal rail of the bed. A little more soft-shoe, some snatches of humming... and then, the drumming. It started slowly, and quickly accelerated, a rapid roll breaking off into syncopated riffs, punctuated with a pop or a shuffle, a never-ending sonic flood of inexhaustible hyperactivity.

A smile spread across Fecteau's face and his eyes met those of Doyle.

The drummer was a perfect inmate. He never shouted, screamed, or threw his food. He never swore, threatened the guards, or trashed his cell. He was neat and tidy, keeping his hair groomed and his body washed. But he had two peculiar characteristics that kept him in solitary: he almost never slept, and he spent his waking hours—all his waking hours—drumming. Never loudly, never in-your-face. The drummer was utterly oblivious to the outside world and the many curses and threats directed at him. He did not even seem to be aware that there was an outside world, and he continued on, never varying, never ruffled or disturbed, totally focused. Curiously, the very softness of the drummer's sounds were the most unendurable aspect of them: Chinese water torture of the ear.

In transferring the prisoner known as A to solitary, Fecteau and Doyle had had orders to deprive the man of all his possessions, including—especially including, the warden had made clear—writing instruments. They had taken everything: books, sketches, photographs, journals, notebooks, pens and inks. The prisoner was left with nothing—and with nothing to do but listen:

Ba-da-ba-da-ditty-ditty-bop-hup-hup-huppa-huppa-be-bop-be-bop-ditty-ditty-ditty-boom! Ditty-boom! Ditty-boom! Ditty-bada-boom-bada-boom-ba-ba-ba-boom! Ba-da-ba-da-pop! Ba-pop! Ba-pop! Ditty-ditty-ditty-shuffle-shuffle-ditty-da-da-da-dit! Ditty-shuffle-tap-shuffle-tap-da-da-dadadada-pop! Dit-ditty-dit-ditty-dap! Dit-ditty...

Fecteau had heard enough. It was already getting under his skin. He gestured toward the exit with his chin, and he and Doyle headed hurriedly back down the hall, the sounds of the drummer dying away.

"I give him a week," said Fecteau.

“A week?” Doyle replied with a snort. “The poor bastard won’t last twenty-four hours.”

Chapter 12

Lieutenant Vincent D'Agosta lay on his belly, in a freezing drizzle, on a barren hill above the Herkmoor Federal Correctional and Holding Facility in Herkmoor, New York. Next to him crouched the dark form of the man named Proctor. The time was midnight. The great prison spread out in a flat valley below them, brilliantly illuminated by the yellow glare of overhead lights, as surreal an industrial confection as a giant oil refinery.

D'Agosta raised a pair of powerful digital binoculars and once again examined the general layout of the facility. It covered at least twenty acres, consisting of three low, enormous concrete building blocks, set in a U shape, surrounded by asphalt yards, lookout towers, fenced service areas, and guardhouses. D'Agosta knew the first building was the Federal Maximum Security Unit, filled with the very worst violent offenders contemporary America could produce—and that, D'Agosta thought grimly, was saying quite a bit. The second, much smaller area bore the official title of Federal Capital Sentence Holding and Transfer Facility. While New York State had no death penalty, there was a federal death penalty, and this is where those few who had been sentenced to death by the federal courts were held.

The third unit also had a name that could only have been invented by a prison bureaucrat: the Federal High-Risk Violent Offender Pretrial Detention Facility. It contained those awaiting trial for a small list of heinous federal crimes: men who had been denied bail and who were considered at especially high risk of escape or flight. This facility held drug kingpins, domestic terrorists, serial killers who had exercised their trade across state boundaries, and those accused of killing federal agents. In the lingo of Herkmoor, this was the Black Hole.

It was this unit that currently housed Special Agent A. X. L. Pendergast.

While some of the storied state prisons, such as Sing Sing and Alcatraz, were famed for never having had an escape, Herkmoor was the only federal facility that could boast a similar record.

D'Agosta's binoculars continued to roam the facility, taking in even the minute details he had already spent three weeks studying on

paper. Slowly, he worked his way from the central buildings to the outbuildings and, finally, to the perimeter.

At first glance, the perimeter of Herkmoor looked unremarkable. Security consisted of the standard triple barrier. The first was a twenty-four-foot chain-link fence, topped by concertina wire, illuminated by the multimillion-candlepower brilliance of xenon stadium lights. A series of twenty-yard spaces spread with gravel led to the second barrier: a forty-foot cinder-block wall topped with spikes and wire. Along this wall, every hundred yards, was a tower kiosk with an armed guard; D'Agosta could see them moving about, wakeful and alert. A hundred-foot gap roamed by Dobermans led to the final perimeter, a chain-link fence identical to the first. From there, a three-hundred-yard expanse of lawn extended to the edge of the woods.

What made Herkmoor unique was what you couldn't see: a state-of-the-art electronic surveillance and security system, said to be the finest in the country. D'Agosta had seen the specs to this system—he had, in fact, been poring over them for days—but he still barely understood it. He did not see that as a problem: Eli Glinn, his strange and silent partner—holed up in a high-tech surveillance van a mile down the road—understood it, and that's what counted.

It was more than a security system: it was a state of mind. Although Herkmoor had suffered many escape attempts, some extraordinarily clever, none had succeeded—and every guard at Herkmoor, every employee, was acutely aware of that fact and proud of it. There would be no bureaucratic turpitude or self-satisfaction here, no sleeping guards or malfunctioning security cameras.

That troubled D'Agosta most of all.

He finished his scrutiny and glanced over at Proctor. The chauffeur was lying prone on the ground beside him, taking pictures with a digital Nikon equipped with a miniature tripod, a 2600mm lens, and specially made CCD chips, so sensitive to light they were able to record the arrival of single photons.

D'Agosta ran over the list of questions Glinn wanted answered. Some were obviously important: how many dogs there were, how many guards occupied each tower, how many guards manned the gates. Glinn had also requested a description of the arrival and departure of all vehicles, with as much information as possible on them. He wanted detailed pictures of the clusters of antennas, dishes, and microwave horns on the building roofs. But other requests were

not so clear. Glinn wanted to know, for example, if the area between the wall and the outer fence was dirt, grass, or gravel. He had asked for a downstream sample from the brook running past the facility. Strangest of all, he had asked D'Agosta to collect all the trash he could find in a certain stretch of the brook. He had asked them to observe the prison through a full twenty-four-hour period, keeping a log of every activity they could note: prisoner exercise times, the movements of guards, the comings and goings of suppliers, contractors, and delivery people. He wanted to know the times when the lights went on and off. And he wanted it all recorded to the nearest second.

D'Agosta paused to murmur some observations into the digital recorder Glinn had given him. He heard the faint whirring of Proctor's camera, the patter of rain on leaves.

He stretched. "Jesus, it really kills me to think of Pendergast in there."

"It must be very hard on him, sir," said Proctor in his usual impenetrable way. The man was no mere chauffeur—D'Agosta had figured that out as soon as he saw him break down and stow away a CAR-15/XM-177 Commando in less than sixty seconds—but he could never seem to penetrate Proctor's Jeeves-like opacity. The soft click and whirl of the camera continued.

The radio on his belt squawked. "Vehicle," came Glinn's voice.

A moment later, a pair of headlights flashed through the bare branches of the trees, approaching on the single road leading to Herkmoor, which ran up the hill from the town two miles away. Proctor quickly swung the lens of his camera around. D'Agosta clapped the binoculars to his eyes, the gain automatically adjusting to compensate for the changing contrasts of dark and light.

The truck came out of the woods and into the glow of lights surrounding the prison. It looked like a food-service truck of some kind, and as it turned, D'Agosta could read the logo on the side, Helmer's Meats and By-Products. It stopped at the guardhouse, presented a sheaf of documents, and was waved through. The three sets of gates opened automatically, one after the other, the gate ahead not opening until the one behind had closed. The soft clicking of the camera's shutter continued. D'Agosta checked his stopwatch, murmured into the recorder. He turned to Proctor.

"Here comes tomorrow's meat loaf," he said, making a feeble

joke.

“Yes, sir.”

D’Agosta thought of Pendergast, the supreme gourmet, eating whatever it was that truck was bringing. He wondered how the agent was handling it.

The truck entered the inner service drive, did a two-point turn, and backed up into a covered loading dock, where it was obscured from view. D’Agosta made another entry on the digital recorder, then settled down to wait. Sixteen minutes later, the vehicle drove back out.

He glanced at his watch. Almost one o’clock. “I’m heading down to get that water and air sample, and do the magnetic drag.”

“Be careful.”

D’Agosta shouldered his small knapsack and retreated to the back side of the hill, making his way down through bare trees, scrub, and mountain laurel. Everything was sopping wet, and water dripped from the trees. Here and there, small patches of damp snow glistened beneath the branches. He didn’t need a light once he’d rounded the hill—there was enough glow from Herkmoor to light up most of the mountain.

D’Agosta was glad of the activity. During the wait on top, he’d had too much time to think. And thinking was the last thing he wanted to do: thinking about his upcoming disciplinary trial, which might very well end in his dismissal from the NYPD. It seemed incredible what had happened in the last few months: his sudden promotion to the NYPD; his blossoming relationship with Laura Hayward; his reconnection with Agent Pendergast. And then it had all come crashing down. His career as a cop was in deep shit; he was estranged from Hayward; and his friend Pendergast was rotting in that damp hell below, shortly to go on trial for his life.

D’Agosta staggered, righted himself. He tilted his bleary face upward, letting the drops of icy rain lash a modicum of alertness into him.

He wiped his face and pushed on. Getting the water sample was going to be tricky, since the stream flowed along the edge of an open field outside the prison walls, completely exposed to the guards in the towers. But this was nothing compared to the magnetic drag he was

charged with performing. Glinn wanted him to crawl as close to the outer perimeter fence as he could get, carrying a miniature magnetometer in his pocket, to see if there were any buried sensors or hidden electromagnetic fields... and then plant the damn thing in the ground. Of course, if there were any sensors, he might well set them off—and then things would get exciting.

He crept slowly downhill, the ground gradually leveling out. Despite his slicker and gloves, he could feel the icy water creeping down his legs and in through the poor sealing of his boots. A hundred yards farther on, he could make out the edge of the woods and hear the gurgle of the stream. He kept low in the laurel bushes as he moved forward. The last few yards he got down on his hands and knees and crawled.

A moment later, he was at the edge of the brook. It was dark and smelled of damp leaves, and along one bank a scalloped edge of old, rotten ice stubbornly remained.

He paused, looking at the prison. The guard towers loomed above now, only two hundred yards distant, the bright lights like multiple suns. He fumbled in his pocket and was about to remove the vial Glinn had given him when he froze. His assumption that the guards would be looking inward, toward the prison, had been wrong: he could clearly see one of them looking out, scanning the edge of the woods nearby with high-powered binoculars.

An important detail.

He froze, flattening himself in the laurel. He had already entered the forbidden perimeter, and he felt horribly exposed to view.

The guard's attention seemed to have swept past him. With exaggerated care, he edged forward and dipped the vial into the icy water, filled it, then screwed the top back on. Then he crept downstream, fishing out trash—old Styrofoam coffee cups, a few beer cans, gum wrappers—and putting it in the knapsack. Glinn had been quite insistent that D'Agosta collect everything. It was a highly unpleasant job, wading in the icy water, sometimes having to root about the cobbled stream bottom up to his shoulder in water. One jam-up of branches across the stream acted like a sieve and he hit the jackpot, collecting a good ten pounds of sodden garbage.

When he was done, he found himself at the point downstream where Glinn wanted the magnetometer placed. He waited until the

guard's attention was at the farthest point; then he half waded, half crawled across the stream. The meadow that surrounded the prison was unkempt, grasses dead and flattened by the winter snows. But there were just enough skeletal weeds to provide at least the semblance of cover.

D'Agosta crawled forward, freezing in place every time the guard swept the binoculars his way.

The minutes crawled by. He felt the icy drizzle trickling down his neck and back. The fence grew closer only by excruciating degrees of slowness. But he had to keep going, and as fast as he dared: the longer he lingered, the higher the probability that one of the guards would spot him.

At last he reached the groomed part of the lawn. He removed the device from his pocket, pushed one hand out through the tall weeds, sank the magnetometer down to the level of the grass, then began an awkward retreat.

Crawling back was much more difficult. Now he was facing the wrong direction and unable to monitor the guard towers. He kept on, slowly but steadily, with frequent long pauses. Forty-five minutes after setting out, he once again crossed the stream and reentered the dripping woods, pushing up through the laurel bushes toward their spy nest on top of the hill, feeling half frozen, his back aching from lugging the knapsack of wet trash.

"Mission accomplished?" Proctor asked as he returned.

"Yeah, assuming I don't lose my frigging toes to frostbite."

Proctor adjusted a small unit. "Signal's coming in nicely. It appears you got within fifty feet of the fence. Nice work, Lieutenant."

D'Agosta turned wearily toward him. "Call me Vinnie," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I'd call you by your first name, but I don't know what it is."

"Proctor is fine."

D'Agosta nodded. Pendergast had surrounded himself with people almost as enigmatic as himself. Proctor, Wren... and in the case of Constance Greene, maybe even more enigmatic. He checked his watch

again: almost two.

Fourteen hours to go.

Chapter 13

Rain hammered against the crumbling brick-and-marble facade of the Beaux Arts mansion at 891 Riverside Drive. Far above the mansard roof and its widow's walk, lightning tore at the night sky. The first-floor windows had been boarded up and covered with tin, and the windows of the upper three stories were securely shuttered—no light pierced through to betray life within. The fenced front yard was overgrown with sumac and ailanthus bushes, and stray bits of wind-whipped trash lay in the carriage drive and beneath the porte cochere. In every way, the mansion appeared abandoned and deserted, like many others along that bleak stretch of Riverside Drive.

For a great many years—a truly remarkable number of years, in fact—this house had been the shelter, redoubt, laboratory, library, museum, and repository for a certain Dr. Enoch Leng. But after Leng's death, the house had passed through obscure and secret channels—along with the charge of Leng's ward, Constance Greene—to his descendant, Special Agent Aloysius Pendergast.

But now, Agent Pendergast was in solitary confinement in the maximum security wing of Herkmoor Correctional Facility, awaiting trial for murder. Proctor and Lieutenant D'Agosta were away on a reconnaissance of the prison. The queer excitable man known as Wren, who was Constance Greene's nominal guardian while Pendergast was gone, was at his night job at the New York Public Library.

Constance Greene was alone.

She sat before a dying fire in the library, where neither the sounds of rain nor those of traffic penetrated. She had before her *My Life* by Giacomo Casavecchio, and she was intently studying the Renaissance spy's account of his celebrated escape from the Leads, the dreaded prison in the Venetian Ducal Palace from which no one had ever escaped before—or would escape again. A stack of similar volumes covered a nearby table: accounts of prison escapes from all over the world, but especially focusing on the federal correctional system in the United States. She read in silence, every so often pausing to make a notation in a leather-bound notebook.

As she finished one of these notations, the fire settled in the grate

with a loud crack. Constance looked up abruptly, eyes widening at the sudden noise. Her eyes were large and violet, and strangely wise for a face that appeared to be no older than twenty-one. Slowly, she relaxed again.

It was not that she felt nervous, exactly. After all, the mansion was hardened against intruders; she knew its secret ways better than anyone; and she could vanish into one of a dozen hidden passages at a moment's notice. No—it was that she had lived here so long, knew the old dark house so well, that she could almost sense its moods. And she had the distinct impression something was not right; that the house was trying to tell her something, warn her about something.

A pot of chamomile tea sat on a side table beside the chair. She put the documents aside, poured herself a fresh cup, then rose. Smoothing down the front of her bone-colored pinafore, she turned and walked to the bookshelves set into the far wall of the library. The stone floor was covered in rich Persian rugs, and as she moved, Constance made no noise.

Reaching the bookshelves, she leaned close, squinting at the gilt bindings. The only light came from the fire and a lone Tiffany lamp beside her chair, and this far corner of the library was dim. At last she found what she was looking for—a Depression-era prison management treatise—and returned to her chair. Seating herself once again, she opened the book, leafed ahead to the contents page. Finding the desired chapter, she reached for her tea, took a sip, then moved to replace the cup.

As she did so, she glanced up.

In the wing chair next to the side table, a man was now seated: tall, aristocratic, with an aquiline nose and a high forehead, pale skin, dressed in a severe black suit. He had ginger-colored hair and a small, neatly trimmed beard. As he looked back at her, the firelight illuminated his eyes. One was a rich hazel green; the other, a milky, dead blue.

The man smiled.

Constance had never seen this man before, and yet she knew immediately who he was. She rose with a cry, the cup dropping from her fingers.

As fast as a striking snake, the man's arm shot out and deftly caught the cup just before it hit the ground. He replaced it on its silver

salver, sat back again. Not a drop had spilled. It had happened so fast that Constance was hardly sure it had happened at all. She remained standing, unable to move. Despite her profound shock, one thing was clear: the man was seated between her and the room's only exit.

The man spoke softly, as if sensing her thoughts. "There is no need for alarm, Constance. I mean you no harm."

She remained where she was, standing motionless before the chair. Her eyes flickered about the room and returned to the seated man.

"You know who I am, don't you, child?" he asked. Even the buttery New Orleans tones were familiar.

"Yes. I know who you are." She choked on the uncanny resemblance to the man she knew so well, all except his hair—and his eyes.

The man nodded. "I am gratified."

"How did you get in here?"

"How I got in is unimportant. Why I am here is the true question, don't you think?"

Constance seemed to consider this for a moment. "Yes. Perhaps you are right." She took a step forward, letting the fingers of one hand drift from her wing chair and slide along the side table. "Very well, then: why are you here?"

"Because it's time we spoke, you and I. It's the least courtesy you could pay me, after all."

Constance took another step, her fingers trailing along the polished wood. Then she paused. "Courtesy?"

"Yes. After all, I—"

With a sudden motion, Constance snatched a letter opener from the side table and leaped at the man. The attack was remarkable not only for its swiftness, but for its silence. She had done nothing, said nothing, to warn the man of her strike.

To no avail. The man twitched aside at the last instant and the letter opener sank to its hilt in the worn leather of the wing chair.

Constance jerked it free and—still without uttering a sound—whirled to face the man, raising the weapon above her head.

As she lunged, the man coolly dodged the stroke and with a flick of his arm seized her wrist; she thrashed and struggled, and they fell to the floor, the man pinning her body under his, the letter opener skidding across the rug.

The man's lips moved to within an inch of her ear. "Constance," he said in a quiet voice. "Du calme. Du calme."

"Courtesy!" she cried once again. "How dare you speak of courtesy! You murder my guardian's friends, disgrace him, tear him from his house!" She stopped abruptly and struggled. A soft groan rose in her throat: a groan of frustration, mingled with another, more complex emotion.

The man continued to speak in a smooth undertone. "Please understand, Constance, I'm not here to hurt you. I'm restraining you simply to prevent harm to myself."

She struggled again. "Hateful man!"

"Constance, please. I have something to say to you."

"I'll never listen to you!" she gasped.

But he continued to pin her to the floor, gently yet firmly. Slowly her struggling ceased. She lay there, heart racing painfully. She became aware of the beating of his own heart—much slower—against her breasts. He was still whispering calming, soothing words into her ear that she tried to ignore.

He pulled away slightly. "If I release you, will you promise not to attack me again? To stay and hear me out?"

Constance did not reply.

"Even a condemned man has the right to be heard. And you may learn that everything is not as it seems."

Still, Constance said nothing. After a long moment, the man raised himself from the floor, then—slowly—released his grip on her wrists.

She stood at once. Breathing heavily, she smoothed down her

pinafore. Her eyes darted around the library again. The man was still positioned strategically between her and the door. He raised a hand toward her wing chair.

“Please, Constance,” he said. “Sit down.”

Warily, she seated herself.

“May we speak now, like civilized people, without further outbursts?”

“You dare speak of yourself as civilized? You? A serial killer and thief.” She laughed scornfully.

The man nodded slowly, as if ingesting this. “Naturally, my brother has taken a certain line with you. After all, it’s worked so well for him in the past. He’s an extraordinarily persuasive and charismatic individual.”

“You can’t presume to imagine I’d believe anything you say. You’re insane—or worse, you do these things as a sane man.” She again glanced past him, toward the library exit and the reception hall beyond.

The man gazed back at her. “No, Constance. I am not insane—on the contrary, like you, I greatly fear insanity. You see, the sad fact is, we have a great deal in common—and not just that which we fear.”

“We haven’t the slightest in common.”

“No doubt this is what my brother would like you to believe.”

It seemed to Constance that the man’s expression had become one of infinite sadness. “It’s true that I am far from perfect and cannot yet expect your trust,” he went on. “But I hope you understand that I intend you no hurt.”

“What you intend means nothing. You’re like a child who befriends a butterfly one day to pull off its wings the next.”

“What do you know of children, Constance? Your eyes are so wise and so old. Even from here, I can see the vast experience written there. What strange and terrible things they must have seen! How very penetrating your gaze! It fills me with sadness. No, Constance: I sense—I know—that childhood was a luxury you were denied. Just as I myself was denied it.”

Constance went rigid.

“Earlier, I said I was here because it’s time we spoke. It is time that you learned the truth. The real truth.”

His voice had sunk so low that the words were only just audible. Against her will, she asked, “The truth?”

“About the relationship between me and my brother.”

In the soft light of the dying fire, Diogenes Pendergast’s peculiar eyes looked vulnerable, almost lost. Gazing back at her, they brightened slightly.

“Ah! Constance, it must sound impossibly strange to you. But gazing on you like this, I feel I would do anything in my power to lift from you that burden of pain and fear and carry it myself. And do you know why? Because when I look at you, I see myself.”

Constance did not reply. She merely sat, motionless.

“I see a person who longs to fit in, to be merely human, and yet who is destined always to remain apart. I see a person who feels the world more deeply, more intensely, than she is willing to admit... even to herself.”

Listening, Constance began to tremble.

“I sense both pain and anger in you. Pain at being abandoned—not once, but several times. And anger at the sheer capriciousness of the gods. Why me? Why again? For it’s true: you’ve been abandoned once again. Though not, perhaps, in exactly the way you imagined it. Here, too, we are the same. I was abandoned when my parents were burned to death by an ignorant mob. I escaped the flames. They did not. I’ve always felt that I should have died, not them; that it was my fault. You feel the same way about the death of your own sister, Mary—that it was you, instead of she, who should have died. Later, I was abandoned by my brother. Ah: I see the disbelief in your face. But then again, you know so little about my brother. All I ask is that you hear me with an open mind.”

He rose. Constance took in a sharp breath, half rising herself.

“No,” Diogenes said, and once again Constance stopped. There was nothing in his tone but weariness now. “There’s no need to run. I’ll take my leave of you. In the future, we’ll speak again, and I’ll tell

you more about the childhood I was denied. About the older brother who took the love I offered and flung back scorn and hatred. Who took pleasure in destroying everything I created—my journals of childish poetry, my translations of Virgil and Tacitus. Who tortured and killed my favorite pet in a way that, even today, I can barely bring myself to think about. Who made it his mission in life to turn everyone against me, with lies and insinuations, to paint me as his evil twin. And when in the end none of this could break my spirit, he did something so awful... so, so awful..." But at this, his voice threatened to break. "Look at my dead eye, Constance: that was the least of what he did..."

There was a brief silence, broken only by the sound of labored breathing as Diogenes struggled to master himself, his opaque eye staring not quite at her, but not quite away from her, either.

He passed one hand across his brow. "I'll be going now. But you'll find I've left you with something. A gift of kinship, a recognition of the pain we share. I hope you'll accept it in the spirit in which it is offered."

"I want nothing from you," Constance said, but the hatred and conviction in her voice had ebbed into confusion.

He held her gaze a moment longer. Then—slowly, very slowly—he turned and walked away, toward the library exit. "Good-bye, Constance," he said quietly over his shoulder. "Take care. I'll see myself out."

Constance sat rooted in place as she listened to his departing footsteps. Only when silence had returned did she rise from her chair.

As she did so, something moved in the handkerchief pocket of her crinoline.

She started. The movement came again. And then a tiny pink nose appeared, bewhiskered and twitching, followed by two beady black eyes and two soft little ears. In wonder, she put her hand in her pocket and cupped it. The little creature climbed up on it and sat upright, his little paws curled as if begging, whiskers trembling, his bright eyes looking pleadingly up into her own. It was a white mouse: sleek, tiny, and perfectly tame—and Constance's heart melted with a suddenness so unexpected that the breath fled from her and tears sprang into her eyes.

Chapter 14

Dust motes drifted in the still air of the Central Archives reading room, and it smelled not unpleasantly of old cardboard, dust, buckram, and leather. Polished oak paneling rose to an elaborately carved and gilded rococo ceiling, dominated by a pair of heavy chandeliers of gilt copper and crystal. Against the far wall stood a bricked-up fireplace of pink marble at least eight feet high and as many wide, and the center of the room was dominated by three massive oaken tables with claw feet, tops laid over with a heavy covering of baize. It was one of the most impressive rooms in the museum—and one of the least known.

It had been over a year since Nora was last in this room, and despite its grandeur, the memories it evoked were not good. Unfortunately, it was the only place where she could peruse the museum's most important historic files.

A faint tap came at the door and the stocky form of Oscar Gibbs entered, his muscular arms piled with ancient documents tied up with twine.

"There's quite a lot on this Tomb of Senef," he said, staggering a little as he laid out the documents on the baize table. "Funny that I never heard of it until yesterday."

"Very few have."

"It's become the talk of the museum overnight." He shook his head, which was shaved as bald as a billiard ball. "Only in a joint like this could you hide an Egyptian tomb."

He paused, catching his breath. "You remember the drill, right, Dr. Kelly? I have to lock you in. Just call extension 4240 when you're done. No pencils or paper; you have to use the ones in those leather boxes." He glanced at her laptop. "And wear linen gloves at all times."

"Got it, Oscar."

"I'll be in the archives if you need me. Remember, extension 4240."

The huge bronze door closed and Nora heard the well-oiled click of the lock. She turned to the table. The neat bundles of documents emanated a heavy odor of decay. She looked them over one by one, getting a general sense of what there was and how much of it she actually needed to read. There was no way she could read them all: it would be a question of triage.

She had asked for accession files to the Tomb of Senef and all related documents in the archives, from its discovery in Thebes to its final 1935 closing as an exhibition. It looked like Oscar had done a thorough job. The oldest documents were in French and Arabic, but they switched to English as the tomb's chain of ownership went from Napoleon's army to the British. There were letters, diagrams of the tomb, drawings, shipping manifests, insurance papers, excerpts from journals, old photographs, and scientific monographs. Once the tomb arrived at the museum, the number of documents exploded. A series of fat folders contained construction diagrams, plats, blueprints, conservators' reports, various pieces of correspondence, and innumerable invoices from the period of the tomb's construction and opening; and beyond that, letters from visitors and scholars, internal museum reports, more conservators' evaluations. The material ended with a flurry of documents relating to the new subway station and the museum's request to the City of New York for a pedestrian tunnel connecting the 81st Street subway station with a new basement entrance to the museum. The final document was a terse report from a long-forgotten curator indicating that the bricking-up of the exhibition had been completed. It was dated January 14, 1935.

Nora sighed, looking at the spread of bundled documents. Menzies wanted a summary report of them by the following morning so they could begin planning the "script" for the exhibition, drawing up label text and introductory panels. She glanced at her watch: 1:00 P.M.

What had she gotten herself into?

She plugged in her laptop and booted it up. At the insistence of her husband, Bill, she had recently switched from a PC to a Mac, and now the boot-up process took a tenth the time—zero to sixty in 8.9 seconds instead of two and a half plodding minutes. It had been like trading up from a Ford Fiesta to a Mercedes SL. As she watched the Apple logo appear, she thought that at least one thing in her life was going right.

She slipped on a pair of crisp linen gloves and began untying the

twine that held the first bundle of papers together, but before she could get the century-old knot undone, the twine parted with a puff of dust.

With infinite care, she opened the first folder and slipped out a yellowed document, written in a spidery French script, and began the laborious process of working her way through it, taking notes on the PowerBook. Despite her difficulties with the script and the French language, she found herself becoming absorbed in the story Menzies had briefly touched on in the tomb the day before.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Napoleon had conceived a quixotic plan to follow Alexander the Great's route of conquest across the Middle East. In 1798, he mounted a huge invasion of Egypt, involving four hundred ships and 55,000 soldiers. In an idea radically modern for the time, Napoleon also brought with him more than 150 civilian scientists, scholars, and engineers, to make a complete scientific study of Egypt and its mysterious ruins. One of these scholars was an energetic young archaeologist named Bertrand Magney de Cahors.

Cahors was one of the first to examine the greatest Egyptological discovery of all time: the Rosetta stone, which Napoleon's soldiers had unearthed while digging a fort along the shore. The stone inflamed him with the possibilities that lay ahead. He followed the Napoleonic army as it pushed southward up the Nile, where they came across the great temples of Luxor and, across the river, the ancient desert canyon that became the most famous graveyard in the world: the Valley of the Kings.

Most of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings were cut out of the living rock and could not be moved. But there were a few tombs of lesser pharaohs, regents, and viziers, built higher up in the valley out of blocks of cut limestone. And it was one of these—the Tomb of Senef, vizier and regent to Thutmosis IV—that Cahors decided to disassemble and take back to France. It was an audacious and even dangerous engineering feat, since the blocks weighed several tons each and had to be individually lowered down a two-hundred-foot cliff in order to be carted to the Nile and floated downstream.

The project was plagued with disaster from the beginning. The locals refused to work on the tomb, believing it to be cursed, and so Cahors dragooned a group of French soldiers to undertake the job. The first calamity struck when the inner tomb—which had been resealed in antiquity after the tomb was robbed—was breached. Nine men died almost immediately. Later, it was hypothesized that carbon dioxide

gas from acid groundwater moving through limestone far below had filled the tomb, causing the asphyxiation of the three soldiers who first entered, along with the half-dozen others sent in to rescue them.

But Cahors was singularly determined, and the tomb was eventually taken apart, block by numbered block, and barged down the Nile to the Bay of Aboukir, where it was laid out on the desert sands in a vast array, awaiting transport to France.

The famous Battle of the Nile ended those plans. After Admiral Horatio Nelson met Napoleon's grand flotilla—and soundly defeated it—in the most decisive naval battle in history, Napoleon fled in a small ship, leaving his armies cut off. Those armies soon capitulated, and in the terms of surrender, the British appropriated their fabulous collections of Egyptian antiquities, including the Rosetta stone—and the Tomb of Senef. A day after the signing of the terms of capitulation, Cahors stabbed himself in the heart with his sword while kneeling amid the stacks of blocks on the sands of Aboukir. And yet his fame as the first Egyptologist lived on, and it was a descendant of this same Cahors who was bankrolling the museum's reopening of the tomb, à la distance.

Nora put the first sheaf of documents aside and picked up the second. A Scottish officer with the Royal Navy, Captain Alisdair William Arthur Cumyn, later Baron of Rattray, managed to acquire the Tomb of Senef in a murky transaction that appeared to involve a card game and two prostitutes. Baron Rattray had the tomb transported and reassembled on his ancestral estate in the Highlands of Scotland, went bankrupt doing so, and was forced to sell off most of his ancestral lands. The Barons of Rattray limped along until the mid-nineteenth century, when the last of the line, in a desperate bid to save what was left of the estate, sold the tomb to the American railroad magnate William C. Spragg. One of the museum's early benefactors, Spragg shipped the tomb across the Atlantic and had it reassembled in the museum, which was under construction at that time. It was his pet project and he spent months haunting the site, hounding the workers, and otherwise making a nuisance of himself. In a tragic irony, he was crushed under the wheels of a horse-drawn ambulance just two days before the grand opening in 1872.

Nora took a break from her perusal of the documents. It was not quite three o'clock, and she was making better progress than she'd expected. If she could get this done by eight, she might have time to share a quick bite with Bill at the Bones. He would love this dark, dusty history. And it might make a good piece for the Times's cultural

or metropolitan section when the tomb's opening neared.

She moved along to the next bundle, all museum documents and in much better condition. The first set of papers dealt with the opening of the tomb. In it were some copies of the engraved invitation:

The President of the United States of America

the Honorable General Ulysses S. Grant

The Governor of the State of New York the Honorable John T. Hoffman

The President of the New York Museum of Natural History

Dr. James K. Moreton

The Trustees and the Director of the Museum

Cordially invite you to a Dinner and Ball in honor of the opening of the

GRAND TOMB OF SENEF

Regent and Vizier to the Pharaoh Thutmosis IV,

Ruler of Ancient Egypt

1419-1386 B.C.

The Diva Eleonora de Graff Bolkonsky will perform Arias

from the New and Celebrated Opera Aïda

by Giuseppe Verdi

Egyptian Costume

Nora held the crumbling invitation in her hand. It amazed her that the museum commanded such a presence in those days that the president himself signed the invitation. She shuffled further and discovered a second document—a menu for the dinner.

Hors d'oeuvres Variés

Consommé Olga

Kebab Egyptien

Filet Mignon Lili

Vegetable Marrow Farcie

Roast Squab & Cress

Pâté de Foie Gras en Croûte

Baba Ghanouj

Waldorf Pudding

Peaches in Chartreuse Jelly

There were a dozen blank invitations in the file. She set one aside, along with the menu, in a “to be photocopied” folder. This was something Menzies should see. In fact, she thought, it would be marvelous if they could duplicate the original opening—without the costume ball, perhaps—and offer the same menu.

She began reading the press notices of the evening. It had been one of those great social events of late-nineteenth-century New York, the likes of which would never be seen again. The guest list read like a roll call at the dawn of the Gilded Age: the Astors and Vanderbilts, William Butler Duncan, Walter Langdon, Ward McAllister, Royal Phelps. There were engravings from Harper’s Weekly showing the ball, with everyone dressed in the most outlandish interpretations of Egyptian costume...

But she was wasting time. She pushed the clippings aside and opened the next folder. It also contained a newspaper clipping, this time from the New York Sun, one of the scandal sheets of the time. It had an illustration of a dark-haired man in a fez, with liquid eyes, dressed in flowing robes. Quickly she scanned the article.

Sun Exclusive

Tomb in New York Museum Is Accursed!

Egyptian Bey Issues Warning

The Malediction of the Eye of Horus

New York—On a recent visit to New York by His Eminence Abdul El-Mizar, Bey of Bolbassa in Upper Egypt, the gentleman from the land

of the pharaohs was shocked to find on display at the New York Museum the Tomb of SENEF.

The Egyptian and his entourage, who were being given a tour of the museum, turned away from the tomb in horror and consternation, warning other visitors that to enter the tomb was to consign oneself to certain and terrible death. "This tomb carries a curse well known in my own country," El-Mizar later told the Sun.

Nora smiled. The article went on in the same vein, mingling a stew of dire threats with wildly inaccurate historical pronouncements, ending, naturally, with a "demand" by the alleged "Bey of Bolbassa" that the tomb be returned forthwith to Egypt. At the conclusion, almost as an afterthought, a museum official was quoted as saying that several thousand visitors entered the tomb every day and that there had never been an "untoward incident."

This article was followed by a flurry of letters from various people, many of them clearly cranks, describing "sensations" and "presences" they had experienced while in the tomb. Several complained of sickness after visiting: shortness of breath, sweats, palpitations, nervous disorders. One, which merited a file all its own, told of a child who fell into the well and broke both his legs, one of which had to be amputated. An exchange of letters from lawyers resulted in a quiet settlement with the family for a sum of two hundred dollars.

She moved to the next file, which was very slender, and opened it, surprised to find inside a single yellowed piece of cardboard with a label pasted on it:

Contents moved to Secure Storage

March 22, 1938

Signed: Lucien P. Strawbridge

Curator of Egyptology

Nora turned this card over in surprise. Secure Storage? That must be what was now known as the Secure Area, where the museum kept its most valuable artifacts. What inside this file could have merited being locked away?

She replaced the piece of cardboard and put the file aside, making a mental note to follow up on this later. There was just one final

bundle to go. Unsealing it, Nora found it to be full of correspondence and notes on the building of the pedestrian tunnel connecting the IND line subway station to the museum.

The correspondence was voluminous. As Nora read through it, she began to realize that the story the museum told—that the tomb had been sealed off because of the construction of the tunnel—was not exactly true. The truth, in fact, was just the opposite: the city wanted to route the pedestrian walkway from the front of the station well past the entrance of the tomb—a quicker and cheaper alternative. But for some reason, the museum wished to situate the tunnel toward the far end of the station. Then they argued that the new route would cut off the tomb's entrance and force its closure. It seemed as if the museum wanted to force the closure of the tomb.

She read on. Toward the end of the file, she found a handwritten note, from the same Lucien P. Strawbridge who'd placed the earlier file in Secure Storage, scribbled on a memo from a New York City official asking why the museum wanted the pedestrian walkway in that particular location, given the extra costs involved.

The marginalia read:

Tell him anything. I want that tomb closed. Let us not miss our last, best chance to rid ourselves of this damnable problem.

L. P. Strawbridge

Damnable problem? Nora wondered just what kind of problem Strawbridge was referring to. She flipped through the file again, but there didn't seem to be a problem connected with the tomb, beyond the annoyance of the Bey of Bolbassa's comments and the crank letters they had generated.

The problem, she decided, must be in the file in Secure Storage. In the end, it didn't seem relevant, and she had run out of time. When she had time, she might look into it. As it was, if she didn't get started on her report, she'd never make dinner with Bill.

She pulled her laptop toward her, opened a new file, and began typing.

Chapter 15

The following day, Captain of Homicide Laura Hayward showed her ID and was deferentially ushered into the office of Jack Manetti, head of security for the New York Museum of Natural History. Hayward liked the fact that, in a museum where the administration seemed overly concerned with status, the head of security had chosen for himself a small, windowless office in the back of the security pool, and had furnished it with utterly functional metal desks and chairs. It said something positive about Manetti—at least she hoped it did.

Manetti was clearly not happy to see her, but he made an attempt at courtesy, offering her a chair and a cup of coffee, which she declined.

“I’m here on the Green assault,” she said. “I wonder if you’d be willing to accompany me to the Sacred Images show so we can run through a few additional questions I have about ingress and egress, access, security.”

“But we’ve been all over that, weeks ago. I thought the investigation was complete.”

“My investigation isn’t complete yet, Mr. Manetti.”

Manetti licked his lips. “Did you go through the office of the director? We’re supposed to coordinate all law enforcement—”

She cut him off and stood up, growing irritated. “I don’t have the time, and neither do you. Let’s go.”

She followed the security director through a labyrinth of corridors and dusty halls, arriving at last at the exhibit entrance. The museum was still open and the security doors hooked back, but the exhibit itself was almost deserted.

“Let’s begin here,” said Hayward. “I’ve been going over the setup again and again, and there are a few things I just don’t get. The perp had to enter the hall through this door, am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“The door at the far end could be opened only from the inside,

not from the outside. Right?”

“That’s right.”

“And the security system was supposed to automatically keep a log of all who came and went, because each magnetic card key is coded with the name of the owner.”

Manetti nodded.

“But the system registered no entry other than Margo Green. The perp then stole her card and used it to leave by the rear exit.”

“That’s the assumption.”

“Green could have entered and left this door hooked open.”

“No. First, that would have been against the rules. Second, the system registered that she didn’t do that. A few seconds after she entered, the door reengaged. We had an electronic log to that effect.”

“So the perp must have been waiting in the hall, hiding, from the time it closed to visitors—five o’clock—until the time of the assault, two A.M.”

Manetti nodded.

“Or else the perp managed to get around the security system.”

“We think that’s highly improbable.”

“But I think it’s almost certain. I’ve been through this hall a dozen times since the assault. There’s no place for the perp to have hidden.”

“It was under construction. Stuff was all over the place.”

“It was two days from opening. It was almost finished.”

“The security system is foolproof.”

“Like the Diamond Hall. Right?”

She watched Manetti’s lips tighten and felt a pang. This wasn’t her style. She was becoming a bitch, and she didn’t like it.

“Thank you, Mr. Manetti,” she said. “I’d like to make another pass through the hall, if you don’t mind.”

“Be our guest.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Manetti disappeared and Hayward took a thoughtful turn around the room where Green had been attacked, picturing, yet again, each step of the assault in a kind of mental stop-motion. She tried to shut out the little voice in her head that said this was a wild-goose chase; that she wasn’t likely to find anything of value here weeks after the attack, after a hundred thousand people had walked through; that she was doing this for all the wrong reasons; that she should just get on with her life and career while she still could.

She took another turn around the room, the little voice disappearing under the rap of her heels against the floor. As she came to the side of the case where the spot of blood had been found, she saw a crouched, dark-suited figure moving toward her from behind the case, ready to spring out.

She pulled out her weapon, drew down on the figure. “You! Freeze! NYPD!”

The person leaped up with a gargled shout, arms windmilling, an unruly cowlick of hair bobbing. Hayward recognized him as William Smithback, the Times city desk reporter.

“Don’t shoot!” the journalist cried. “I was just, you know, looking around! Jesus, you’re scaring the hell out of me with that thing!”

Hayward holstered her weapon, feeling sheepish. “Sorry. I’m a bit on edge.”

Smithback squinted. “You’re Captain Hayward, isn’t that right?”

She nodded.

“I’m covering the Pendergast case for the Times.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Good. In fact, I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

She glanced at her watch. “I’m very busy. Make an appointment through my office.”

“I already tried that. You don’t speak to the press.”

“That’s right.” She gave him a stern look and took a step forward, but he didn’t step aside to let her pass.

“Do you mind?”

“Listen,” he said, talking fast. “I think we can help each other. You know, exchange information, that kind of thing.”

“If you have any information of an evidentiary nature, you better divulge it now or get slapped with an obstruction charge,” she said sharply.

“No, nothing like that! It’s just that... well, I think I know why you’re here. You’re not satisfied. You think maybe Pendergast isn’t the one who assaulted Margo. Am I right?”

“What makes you say that?”

“A busy homicide captain doesn’t waste her valuable time visiting the scene of the crime when the case is wrapped up. You must have your doubts.”

Hayward said nothing, concealing her surprise.

“You wonder if the killer might have been Diogenes Pendergast, the agent’s brother. That’s why you’re here.”

Still, Hayward said nothing, her surprise mounting.

“And that happens to be why I’m here, too.” He paused and peered at her curiously, as if to gauge the effect of his words.

“What makes you think it wasn’t Agent Pendergast?” asked Hayward cautiously.

“Because I know Agent Pendergast. I’ve been covering him—in a manner of speaking—since the museum murders seven years ago. And I know Margo Green. She phoned me from her hospital bed. She swears it wasn’t Pendergast. She says her attacker had eyes of two different colors, one green, the other milky blue.”

“Pendergast is known to be a master of disguises.”

“Yeah, but that description fits his brother. Why would he disguise himself as his brother? And we already know his brother pulled the diamond heist and kidnapped that woman, Lady Maskelene. The only logical answer is that Diogenes also assaulted

Margo and framed his brother. QED.”

Once again, Hayward had to control her surprise, his thinking so closely paralleling her own. Finally she allowed a smile. “Well, Mr. Smithback, you seem to be quite the investigative reporter.”

“That I am,” he hastened to confirm, smoothing down his cowlick, which popped up again, unrepentant.

She paused a moment, considering. “All right, then. Maybe we can help each other. My involvement, naturally, will be strictly off the record. Background only.”

“Absolutely.”

“And I expect you to bring anything you find to me first. Before you bring it to your paper. That’s the only way I’ll consent to work with you.”

Smithback nodded vigorously. “Of course.”

“Very well. It seems Diogenes Pendergast has vanished. Completely. The trail stops dead at his hideout on Long Island, the place where he held Lady Maskelene prisoner. Such an utter disappearance just doesn’t happen these days, except for one possible circumstance: he slipped into an alter ego. A long-established alter ego.”

“Any ideas who?”

“We’ve drawn a blank. But if you were to publish a story about it... well, it just might shake something loose. A tip, a nosy neighbor’s observation: you understand? Naturally, my name couldn’t appear.”

“I certainly do understand. And—and what do I get in return?”

Hayward’s smile returned, broader this time. “You’ve got it backward. I just did you the favor. The question now is, what do you do for me in return? I know you’re covering the diamond heist. I want to know all about it. Everything, big or small. Because you’re right: I think Diogenes is behind the Green assault and the Duchamp murder. I need all the evidence I can get, and because I am in Homicide, it’s difficult for me to access information at the precinct level.”

She didn’t say that Singleton, the precinct captain handling the diamond theft, was unlikely to share information with her.

“No problem. We have a deal.”

She turned away, but Smithback called after her. “Wait!”

She glanced back at him, raising an eyebrow.

“When do we meet again? And where?”

“We don’t. Just call me if—when—something important turns up.”

“Okay.”

And she left him in the semidarkness of the exhibition hall, jotting notes hurriedly onto the back of a scrap of paper.

Chapter 16

Jay Lipper, computer effects consultant, paused in the empty burial chamber, peering about in the dim light. Four weeks had passed since the museum made the big announcement about the new opening of the Tomb of Senef; and Lipper himself had been on the job three weeks. Today was the big meeting, and he had arrived ten minutes early, to walk through the tomb and visualize the setup he'd diagrammed out: where to lay the fiber-optic cables, where to put the LEDs, where to mount the speakers, where to float the spots, where to put the holographic screens. It was two weeks before the grand opening, and an incredible amount still had to be done.

He could hear a medley of voices echoing down the multi-chambered tomb from somewhere near the entrance, distorted, mingled with the sound of hammering and the whine of Skilsaws. The teams of workmen were going flat out, and no expense was being spared. Especially his expense: he was charging \$120 an hour, working eighty hours a week, making a fortune. On the other hand, he was earning every penny of it. Especially given the clown the museum had assigned him as cable-puller, duct-taper, and all-around electronic gofer. A real knuckle-dragger: if the guy was typical of the museum's tech staff, they were in trouble. The man was so buffed and toned he looked like a brick of meat, with a bullet head that contained about as much gray matter as a spaniel. The man probably spent his weekends in the gym instead of boning up on the technology he was supposed to understand.

As if on cue, the clown's voice rang down the corridor. "Dark as a tomb in here, hey, Jayce?" Teddy DeMeo came lumbering around the corner, arms full of an untidy bundle of rolled electronic diagrams.

Lipper tightened his lips and reminded himself once again of that \$120 an hour. The worst of it was that, before he'd gotten to know what DeMeo was like, Lipper had unwisely mentioned to him the massively multiplayer online RPG he was involved in: Land of Darkmord. And DeMeo had immediately gone online and subscribed. Lipper's character, a devious half-elf sorcerer with a +5 onyx cape and a full book of offensive spells, had spent weeks organizing a military expedition to a distant castle stronghold. He'd been recruiting warriors—and suddenly, there was DeMeo, in the character of a slope-

faced orc carrying a club, volunteering for military service, acting like his best friend, full of asinine questions and stupid off-color jokes and embarrassing him in front of all the other players.

DeMeo came to a halt beside him, breathing hard, the sweat pouring off his brow, smelling like a damp sock.

“All right, let’s see...” He unrolled one of the plats. Naturally, DeMeo was holding it upside down, and it took him several seconds to right it.

“Give it to me,” said Lipper, snatching it from him and smoothing it out. He glanced at his watch. Still five minutes before the curatorial committee was due to arrive. No problem—at two dollars a minute, Lipper would wait for Godot.

He sniffed, looked around. “Someone’s going to have to do something about this humidity. I can’t have my electronics sitting in a sweatshop.”

“Yeah,” said DeMeo, looking around. “And will you look at this weird shit? I mean, what the hell’s that? Gives me the creeps.”

Lipper glanced over at the fresco in question, depicting a human being with the black head of an insect, wearing pharaonic dress. The burial chamber was creepy: walls black with hieroglyphics, ceiling covered with a representation of the night sky, strange yellow stars and a moon against a field of deep indigo. But the truth was, Lipper liked being creeped out. It was like being inside the world of Darkmord for real.

“That’s the god Khepri,” he said. “A man with the head of a scarab beetle. He helps roll the sun across the sky.” Working on the project had fascinated Lipper, and he’d delved deeply into Egyptian mythology over the last several weeks, looking for background and visual cues.

“The Mummy meets The Fly,” said DeMeo with a laugh.

Their conversation was cut short by a rising hubbub of voices as a group entered the burial chamber: the man in charge, Menzies, followed by his curators.

“Gentlemen! I’m glad you’re already here. We don’t have much time.” Menzies came forward, shook their hands. “You all know each other, of course.”

They all nodded. How could they not, having practically been living together these past few weeks? There was Dr. Nora Kelly, someone Lipper could at least work with; the smug Brit named Wicherly; and Mr. Personality himself, the anthropology curator, George Ashton. The committee.

As the new arrivals talked briefly among themselves, Lipper felt a painful dig in his ribs. He looked over to see DeMeo, mouth open, winking and leering. “Man, oh man,” he whispered, nodding at Dr. Kelly. “I’d climb all over that in a heartbeat.”

Lipper glanced away, rolling his eyes.

“Well!” Menzies turned to address them again. “Shall we do the walk-through?”

“Sure thing, Dr. Menzies!” said DeMeo.

Lipper gave him a look he hoped would shut the moron up. This was his plan, his brainwork, his artistry: DeMeo’s job was rack-mounting the equipment, pulling cable, and making sure juice got to all parts of the system.

“We should start at the beginning,” Lipper said, leading them back to the entrance with another warning side glance at DeMeo.

They threaded their way back through the half-built exhibits and the construction teams. As they approached the entrance to the tomb, Lipper felt his annoyance at DeMeo displaced by a growing excitement. The “script” for the sound-and-light show had been written by Wicherly, with various additions by Kelly and Menzies, and the end result was good. Very good. In turning it into reality, he’d made it even better. This was going to be one kick-ass exhibition.

Reaching the God’s First Passage, Lipper turned to face the others. “The sound-and-light show will be triggered automatically. It’s important that people be let into the tomb as a group and move through it together. As they proceed, they’ll trip hidden sensors that in turn start each sequence of the show. When the sequence ends, they will move to the next part of the tomb and see the next sequence. After the show ends, the group will have fifteen minutes to look around the tomb before being escorted out and the next group brought in.”

He pointed to the ceiling. “The first sensor will be up there, in the corner. As the visitors pass this point, the sensor will register, wait

thirty seconds for stragglers to catch up, and start the first sequence, which I call act 1.”

“How are you hiding the cable?” asked Menzies.

“No problem,” broke in DeMeo. “We’re running it through black one-inch conduit. They’ll never see it.”

“Nothing can be affixed to the painted surface,” said Wicherly.

“No, no. The conduit is steel, self-supporting, only needs to be anchored in the corners. It floats two millimeters above the surface of the paint, won’t even touch it.”

Wicherly nodded.

Lipper breathed out, thankful that DeMeo hadn’t come across as an idiot—at least not yet.

Lipper led the party into the next chamber. “When the visitors reach the center of the God’s Second Passage—where we’re standing now—the lights will suddenly dim. There will be the sound of digging, furtive chatter, pickaxes striking stone—at first just sounds in the dark, no visuals. A voice-over will explain that this is the tomb of Senef and that it is about to be robbed by the very priests who buried him two months before. The sounds of digging will get louder as the robbers reach the first sealed door. They’ll attack it with pickaxes—and then, suddenly, one will break through. That’s when the visuals start.”

“The point where they break through the sealed door is critical,” Menzies said. “What’s needed is a resounding blow from the pickax, a tumble of stones inward, and a piercing shaft of light like a bolt of lightning. This is a key moment and it needs to be dramatic.”

“It will be dramatic.” Lipper felt a faint irritation. Menzies, while charming enough, had been intrusive and meddlesome about certain technical details, and Lipper was worried he might micromanage the installation as well.

Lipper continued. “Then the lights come up and the voice-over directs the audience to the well.” He led them through the long passageway and a broad staircase. Ahead, a new bridge had been built over the pit, broad enough to hold a large group.

“As they approach the well,” Lipper went on, “a sensor in that

corner will pick up their passage and begin act 2.”

“Right,” DeMeo interrupted. “Each act will be independently controlled by a pair of dual-processor PowerMac G5s, slaved to a third G5 that will act as backup and master controller.”

Lipper rolled his eyes. DeMeo had just quoted, word for word, from Lipper’s own spec sheet.

“Where will these computers be located?” asked Menzies.

“We’re going to cable through the wall—”

“Look here,” said Wicherly. “No one’s going to drill any holes in the walls of this tomb.”

DeMeo turned to him. “It just so happens that a long time ago somebody already drilled through the wall—in five places! The holes were cemented up, but I found them and cleared them out.” DeMeo crossed his muscled arms in triumph, as if he’d just kicked sand in the face of a ninety-eight-pound weakling at the beach.

“What’s on the far side?” Menzies asked.

“A storeroom,” said DeMeo, “currently empty. We’re converting it to a control room.”

Lipper cleared his throat, forestalling any more interruptions by DeMeo. “In act 2, visitors will see the digitized images of the robbers bridging the well so they can break the second sealed door. A screen will lower on the far side of the well—unseen to the visitors, of course. Then a holographic projector in the far corner will project images of the robbers in the passageway ahead, carrying burning torches, breaking the seals of the inner door, smashing it down, and heading for the burial chamber. The idea here is to make the visitors feel like they’re actually part of the gang of robbers. They’ll follow the robbers into the inner tomb—where act 3 begins.”

“Lara Croft, watch out!” DeMeo said, looking around and laughing at his witticism.

The group entered the burial chamber, where Lipper paused again. “The visitors will hear things before they see anything—breakage, shouting. As they enter this end of the burial chamber, they’ll be stopped by a gate, here. And then the main event begins. First, it’s dark, with frightened, excited voices. Then more smashing

and breaking. A sudden flare, and another, and the torches are lit up. We see the sweaty, terrified, avaricious faces of the priests. And gold! Everywhere, the gleam of gold.” He turned to Wicherly. “Just as you wrote in the script.”

“Excellent!”

“As the torches are lit, the computer-controlled lighting will come up, dimly illuminating parts of the burial chamber. The thieves will shove off and smash the stone lid of the sarcophagus. Then they’ll hoist up the top of the inner sarcophagus—the one in solid gold—and one of them will leap in and begin ripping off the linen wrappings. Then, with a shout of triumph, they’ll hold up the scarab and smash it, thus breaking its power.”

“That’s the climax,” said Menzies, breaking in excitedly. “That’s where I want the peal of thunder, the strobes simulating flashes of lightning.”

“And you’ll have it,” DeMeo said. “We got a complete Dolby Surround and Pro Logic II sound system and four Chauvet Mega II 750-watt strobes, along with a bunch of spots. All controlled by a twenty-four-channel DMX lighting console, fully automated.”

He looked around proudly, as if he knew what the hell he was talking about instead of, once again, quoting verbatim from Lipper’s carefully designed specs. God, Lipper couldn’t stand him. He waited a moment before resuming.

“After the light and thunder, the holographic projectors will switch back on, and we’ll see Senef himself rise from the sarcophagus. The priests will fall back, terrified. This is all meant to be in their minds, what they imagine, as was written in the script.”

“But it will be realistic?” Nora asked, frowning. “Not hokey?”

“It’ll all be 3-D, and the holographic images are a bit like ghosts—you can see through them, but only when there’s strong light behind. We’ll manipulate the light levels very carefully to exploit that illusion. Some of it’s video-based, some of it C.G. Anyway, Senef rises, violated, and points a finger. To more flashes of lightning and thunder, he speaks of his life, what he has done, what a great regent and vizier he was to Thutmosis, and of course, this is where you slip in the educational stuff.”

“Meanwhile,” said DeMeo, “we’ve got a 500-watt Jem Glaciator

hidden in the sarcophagus, pumping out an awesome ground fog. Two thousand cubic feet a minute.”

“My script doesn’t call for artificial smoke,” said Wicherly. “This could damage the paintings.”

“The Jem system uses only environmentally friendly fluids,” Lipper said. “Guaranteed not to chemically alter anything.”

Nora Kelly was frowning again. “Forgive me for raising this question, but is this level of theatricality really necessary?”

Menzies turned to her. “Why, Nora! This was your idea to begin with.”

“I was imagining something lower-key, not strobe lights and fog machines.”

Menzies chuckled. “As long as we’re going this route, Nora, we should do it right. Trust me, we’re creating an unforgettable educational experience. It’s a marvelous way to slip a little learning to the vulgus mobile without them ever realizing it.”

Nora continued to look doubtful, but said nothing further.

Lipper resumed. “As Senef speaks, the robbers fall to the floor in terror. Then Senef melts back into his sarcophagus, the robbers vanish, the holographic screens retract, the lights come up—and suddenly the tomb is as it was, before the robbery. A museum exhibit once again. The gate slides back and the visitors are free to tour the burial chamber as if nothing had happened.”

Menzies raised a finger. “But they will do so having gained an appreciation of Senef and been entertained in the process. Now for the million-dollar question: can you finish by deadline?”

“We’ve already outsourced as much of the programming as possible,” Lipper said. “The electrical staff are working flat out. I’d say we can have it installed and ready for alpha testing in four days.”

“That’s excellent.”

“And then comes the debugging.”

Menzies cocked his head questioningly. “Debugging?”

“That’s the killer. A rule of thumb says the debugging takes twice

as long as the original programming.”

“Eight days?”

Lipper nodded, uneasy from the sudden darkening of Menzies’s face.

“Four plus eight is twelve—two days before the gala opening. Can you finish the debugging in five?”

Something in Menzies’s tone led Lipper to think it was more an order than a question. He swallowed: the schedule already verged on the insane. “We’ll certainly try.”

“Good. Now, let’s talk for a minute about the opening. Dr. Kelly suggested we duplicate the original opening in 1872, and I wholeheartedly concurred. We are planning a cocktail reception, a bit of opera, and then the guests will be escorted into the tomb for the sound-and-light show. Dinner will follow.”

“How many are we talking about?” Lipper asked.

“Six hundred.”

“Obviously we’re not going to fit six hundred people into the tomb at one time,” Lipper said. “I’ve been estimating two hundred at a go for the sound-and-light show, which lasts about twenty minutes, but we could up that to, say, three hundred for the opening.”

“Fine,” said Menzies. “We’ll divide them into two groups. The first in, of course, will be the A-list: the mayor, governor, senators and congressmen, the museum’s top brass, the biggest patrons, movie stars. With two showings, we’ll get guests through the exhibit within an hour. Finish off the entire crowd.” He looked from Lipper to DeMeo. “You two are crucial. There can’t be any mistakes. Everything’s riding on you finishing that sound-and-light show on time. Four days plus five: that’s nine days.”

“I’ve got no problem,” said DeMeo, all smiles and self-confidence: gofer and cable-puller extraordinaire.

Those disquieting blue eyes now turned back to Lipper. “And you, Mr. Lipper?”

“It’ll happen.”

“Delighted to hear it. I trust you’ll keep me up-to-date with progress reports?”

They nodded.

Menzies glanced at his watch. “Nora, if you’ll excuse me, I have to catch a train. I’ll check in with you later.”

Menzies and the curators were gone, leaving Lipper alone with DeMeo once again. He glanced at his watch. “We’d better get going, DeMeo, because I’d like to get to sleep tonight before four A.M. for a change.”

“What about Darkmord?” DeMeo asked. “You promised to have the band of warriors ready for the attack by midnight.”

Lipper groaned. Shit. They would just have to launch the attack on Castle Gloaming without him.

Chapter 17

When Margo Green awoke, a bright afternoon sun was slanting in through the windows of the Feversham Clinic. Outside, puffy cumulus clouds drifted across a lazy blue sky. The distant call of waterbirds came from the direction of the Hudson River.

She yawned, stretched, then sat up in bed. Glancing at the clock, she noticed it was quarter to four. The nurse should be in soon with her afternoon cup of peppermint tea.

The hospital table beside her bed was crowded: back issues of *Natural History*, a Tolstoy novel, a portable music player, a laptop, and a copy of the *New York Times*. She reached for the newspaper, flipped through the C section. Maybe she could finish the crossword before Phyllis brought her tea.

Now that her condition was no longer critical, recovery at the clinic had settled into a kind of routine. She found that she looked forward to the afternoon chats with Phyllis. She hardly had any visitors—no visitors at all, actually, save her mother and Captain Laura Hayward—and the thing she missed most, other than her career, was companionship.

Picking up a pencil, she applied herself to the crossword. But it was one of those late-in-the-week puzzles, full of coy clues and obscure references, and mental exercise still tired her. After a few minutes, she put it aside. She found her thoughts straying back to Hayward's recent visit and the unpleasant memories it had reawakened.

It disturbed her that her memory of the attack remained shadowy. There were bits and pieces, disconnected, as if from a nightmare—but nothing coherent. She'd been inside the *Sacred Images* exhibition, checking the arrangement of some Native American masks. While there, she'd become aware of a presence: somebody else in the exhibition, lurking in the shadows. Following her. Stalking her. Cornering her. She dimly remembered making a stand, fighting with a box cutter. Had she wounded her pursuer? The actual attack itself was the most fragmentary: little more than a searing pain in her back. And that had been all—until she woke up in this room.

She folded up the newspaper, put it back on the table. The most disturbing thing was that, even though she knew her attacker had spoken to her, she couldn't remember anything he had said. His words were gone, fallen into the darkness. Curiously, she did remember, seared into her mind, the man's strange eyes and his hideous, dry chuckle.

She turned restlessly in her bed, wondering where Phyllis was, still thinking of Hayward's visit. The captain had asked a lot of questions about Agent Pendergast and his brother, a man with the peculiar name of Diogenes. It all seemed strange: Margo hadn't seen Pendergast in years, and she had never even known the FBI agent had a brother.

Now at last the door to her room opened and Phyllis walked in. But she wasn't carrying a tray of tea things, and her friendly face bore an official expression.

"Margo, you have a visitor," she said.

Margo barely had time to react to this announcement before a familiar figure appeared in the doorway: the chairman of her department at the museum, Dr. Hugo Menzies. He was dressed as usual in rumpled elegance, his thick white hair combed back from his forehead, his lively blue eyes darting briefly around the room before settling on her.

"Margo!" he cried, coming forward, patrician features breaking into a smile. "How wonderful to see you."

"Same here, Dr. Menzies," she replied. Her surprise at having a visitor was quickly replaced by embarrassment: she wasn't exactly dressed to receive her boss.

But Menzies, as if sensing her discomfort, was quick to put her at ease. He thanked Phyllis, waited until the nurse had left the room, then took a seat beside the bed.

"What a beautiful room!" he exclaimed. "And with an exquisite view of the Hudson River Valley. The quality of the light here is second only to Venice, I think; perhaps that's why it has drawn so many painters."

"They've been very good to me here."

"As well they should. You know, my dear, I've been terribly

worried about you. The entire Anthropology Department has. We can't wait for your return."

"Neither can I."

"Your location has been almost a state secret. Until yesterday, I never even knew this place existed. As it was, I had to charm my way past half the staff." He smiled.

Margo smiled back. If anyone could charm his way in, Menzies could. She'd been lucky to get him as her supervisor: many museum curators lorded it over their minions, behaving like conceited philosopher-kings. Menzies was the exception: affable, receptive to the ideas of others, supportive of his staff. It was true—she couldn't wait to get out of here and back to work. Museology, the periodical she edited, was rudderless in her absence. If only she didn't grow tired so easily...

She realized her mind was drifting. She roused herself, glanced at Menzies. He was looking back at her, concern on his face.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm still a little out of it."

"Of course you are," he said. "Perhaps that's why this is still necessary?" And he nodded at the saline drip hanging beside the bed.

"The doctor said that's just a precautionary measure. I'm getting plenty of fluids now."

"Good, very good. The loss of blood must have been a severe shock. So much blood, Margo. There's a reason they call it the living liquid, don't you agree?"

A strange current, almost like a physical shock, passed through Margo. The weakness, the feeling of torpor, receded. She suddenly felt wide awake. "What did you say?"

"I said, have they given you any indication of when you can leave?"

Margo relaxed. "The doctors are very pleased with my progress. Another two weeks or so."

"And then bed rest at home, I assume?"

"Yes. Dr. Winokur—that's my primary physician here—said I

would need another month's recuperation before returning to work."

"He would know best."

Menzies's voice was low and soothing, and Margo felt torpidity returning. Almost without realizing it, she yawned.

"Oh!" she said, embarrassed anew. "I'm sorry."

"Think nothing of it. I don't want to overstay my welcome, I'll leave shortly. Are you tired, Margo?"

She smiled faintly. "A little bit."

"Sleeping all right?"

"Yes."

"Good. I was worried you might have been having nightmares." Menzies glanced over his shoulder, toward the open door and the corridor beyond.

"No, not really."

"That's my girl! What spunk!"

There: that strange electric tingle again. Menzies's voice had changed—something about it was both foreign and disquietingly familiar. "Dr. Menzies," she began, sitting up once more.

"Now, now, you just sit back and rest." And with a gentle but firm pressure on her shoulder, he guided her back down onto the pillow. "I'm so glad to hear you're sleeping well. Not everybody could put such a traumatic event behind them."

"It's not exactly behind me," she said. "I just don't seem to remember what happened very well, that's all."

Menzies laid a comforting hand on hers. "That's just as well," he said, slipping his other hand inside his jacket.

Margo felt an inexplicable sense of alarm. She was tired—that's all it was. Much as she liked Menzies, much as she appreciated this break in the monotony, she needed to rest.

"After all, nobody would want such memories. The noises in the empty exhibition hall. Being followed. The invisible footfalls, the

falling of boards. The sudden darkness.”

Margo felt an unfocused panic well up within her. She stared at Menzies, unable to wrap her mind around what he was saying. The anthropologist kept on talking in his low, soothing voice.

“Laughter in the blackness. And then, the plunge of the knife... No, Margo. Nobody would want those memories.”

And then Menzies himself laughed. But it wasn't his voice. No: it was another voice, another voice entirely: a hideous, dry chuckle.

A sudden dreadful shock burned through the gathering lethargy. No. Oh, no. It couldn't be...

Menzies sat in the chair, looking at her intently, as if gauging the effect of his words.

Then he winked.

Margo tried to pull away, opened her mouth to scream. But even as she did so, the feeling of lassitude intensified, flooding her limbs, leaving her unable to speak or move. She had a desperate realization that the lethargy wasn't normal, that something was happening to her...

Menzies let his hand fall away from hers, and as he did so, she saw—with a thrill of horror—that his other hand had been concealed beneath. It held a tiny syringe, which was injecting a colorless liquid into the IV tube at her wrist. Even as she watched, he withdrew the syringe, palmed it, then replaced it in his suit jacket.

“My dear Margo,” he said, sitting back, his voice so very different now. “Did you really think you'd seen the last of me?”

Panic, and a desperate desire to survive, surged within her—yet she felt utterly powerless against the drug that was spreading through her veins, silencing her voice and paralyzing her limbs. Menzies swept to his feet, placed a finger against his lips, and whispered, “Time to sleep, Margo...”

The hated darkness surged in, blotting out sight and thought. Panic, shock, and disbelief fell aside as the mere act of drawing breath became a struggle. As she lay paralyzed, Margo saw Menzies turn and hasten from the room, heard his faint yelling for a nurse. But then his voice, too, was subsumed into the hollow roar that filled her head,

and darkness gathered in her eyes until the roar dwindled into blackness and eternal night, and she knew no more.

Chapter 18

Four days after their meeting with Menzies, the sound-and-light show was finally installed and ready for debugging, and that night they were pulling the final cables, hooking everything up. Jay Lipper crouched by the dusty hole near the floor of the Hall of the Chariots, listening to various sounds emerging from the hole: grunts, heavy breathing, muttered curses. It was the third night in a row they'd worked on the install into the wee hours of the morning, and he was dog-tired. He couldn't take much more of this. The exhibition had basically taken over his life. All his guildmates in Land of Darkmord had given up on him and continued with the online game. By now, they'd leveled up once, maybe twice, and he was hopelessly behind.

"Got it?" came DeMeo's muffled voice from the hole. Lipper looked down to see the end of a fiber-optic cable poking out of the blackness.

Lipper seized the end. "Got it."

He pulled it through, then waited for DeMeo to come around from the other side. Soon DeMeo's blocky figure, backlit and faint in the dim light of the tomb, came huffing down the passageway, cables coiled about his massive shoulders. Lipper handed him the cable end and DeMeo plugged it into the back of a PowerBook sitting on a nearby worktable. Later, when the artifacts were all in place, the laptop would be artfully hidden behind a gilded and painted chest. But for now, it was out in the open, where they could access it.

DeMeo slapped the dust off his thighs with a grin, then held up his hand. "High five, bro. We did it."

Lipper ignored the hand, unable to disguise his irritation. He had had just about enough of DeMeo. The museum's two electricians had insisted on going home at midnight, and as a result he'd found himself on his hands and knees, acting as DeMeo's damn assistant.

"We've got a long way to go," he said in a sulky voice.

DeMeo's hand dropped. "Yeah, but at least, the cabling's been pulled, the software's loaded, and we're on schedule. You can't ask for better than that, right, Jayce?"

Lipper reached over and turned on the computer, initiating the boot sequence. He hoped to hell the computer would see the network and the remote devices, but he knew it wouldn't. It was never that easy—and besides, DeMeo was the one who set up the frigging network. Anything could happen.

The computer finished booting and, with a sinking heart, Lipper began sending pings over the network, checking to see how many of the two dozen remote devices were missing and would require time-consuming troubleshooting to locate. He'd be lucky if the computer saw half of the peripherals on first boot-up: it was the nature of the business.

But as he moused his way from one network address to another, a sense of disbelief stole over him. Everything seemed to be there.

He ran over his checklist. It was impossible, but true: the entire network was there, visible and operational. All the remote devices, the sound-and-light apparatus, were responding and seemed to be perfectly synchronized. It was as if someone had already worked out the kinks.

Lipper rechecked his list, but with the same result. Disbelief gave way to a kind of guarded jubilation: he could not recall a single job where such a complicated network was up and running on the first try. And it wasn't just the network: the entire project had been like that, everything coming together like a charm. It had taken days of seemingly endless work, but in the real world it would have taken even longer. Probably a lot longer. He fetched a deep breath.

"How's it look?" DeMeo asked, crowding up behind him to peer at the small screen. Lipper could smell his oniony breath.

"Looks good." Lipper edged away.

"Sweet!" DeMeo gave a whoop that echoed through the tomb, just about blowing out Lipper's eardrum. "I am the man! I'm a freaking network monster!" He danced around the room, doing an ungainly buck-and-wing, pumping his fist into the air. Then he glanced over at Lipper. "Let's do a test run."

"I have a better idea. Why don't you go out and get us a couple of pizzas?"

DeMeo looked at him in surprise. "What—now? You don't want to do an alpha?"

Lipper certainly did want to do a test run. But not with DeMeo breathing down his neck, whooping in his ear, and acting like an ass. Lipper wanted to admire his handiwork quietly, in a focused way. He needed a break from DeMeo, and he needed one bad.

“We’ll do a run after the pizzas. On me.”

He watched as DeMeo considered this.

“All right,” DeMeo said. “What do you want?”

“The Neapolitan. With a large iced tea.”

“I’m going for the Hawaiian double pineapple with honey-glazed ham, extra garlic, and two Dr Peppers.”

It was typical of DeMeo to assume Lipper gave a shit what kind of pizza he wanted. Lipper pulled out two twenties, passed them over.

“Thanks, bro.”

He watched DeMeo’s form labor up the stone staircase and vanish in the gloom. The footsteps echoed slowly away.

Lipper breathed in the blessed silence. Maybe DeMeo would be run over by a bus on the way back.

With that pleasant thought in mind, he turned his attention back to the computer’s control panel. He moused over each peripheral device in turn, checking to see that it was alive and functional, surprised again that each one responded perfectly, on cue, as if somebody had already debugged the network for them. DeMeo, for all his wisecracks and shenanigans, had actually done his job—and done it perfectly.

Suddenly he paused, frowning. A software icon was jumping frantically in the dock. Somehow the main routines for the sound-and-light show had loaded automatically, when, in fact, he had specifically programmed them to load manually, at least during the alpha testing, so he could step through the code and check each module.

So there was a glitch, after all. He’d need to fix it, of course: but not right now. The software was loaded, the controllers were online and ready, the screens in place, the fog machine filled.

He might as well run it.

He drew in another breath, savoring the peace and quiet, his finger over the return key, ready to execute the program. Then he paused. A sound had drifted toward him from the deeper part of the tomb: the Hall of Truth, or maybe even the burial chamber itself. Couldn't be DeMeo, since he'd be coming from the opposite direction. And the pizzas would take at least half an hour; if he were lucky, maybe even forty minutes.

Perhaps it was a guard or something.

The sound came again: a strange, dry, scurrying sound. No guard made a noise like that.

Mice, maybe?

He rose indecisively. It was probably nothing. Christ, he was letting himself get spooked by all this curse crap the guards had started to whisper about. It was probably just a mouse. After all, there'd been plenty of mice in the old Egyptian galleries, enough so the Maintenance Department had needed to place glue traps. Still, if some had gotten into the tomb itself—maybe through one of the cable holes DeMeo had opened up—all it would take was a pair of rodent teeth sunk into one cable to crash the whole system and cause a delay of hours, maybe even days, while they examined each cable. Inch by frigging inch.

Another scurry, like wind rustling dead leaves. Leaving the lights dimmed, he picked up DeMeo's coat—ready to throw it over a mouse if he found one—then rose and made his way stealthily into the deepest recesses of the tomb.

Teddy DeMeo fumbled for his key card, swiping it through the newly installed lock to the Egyptian gallery while trying not to drop the pizzas at the same time. The damn pies were cold—the guards at the security entrance had taken their sweet time clearing him through, when the same idiots had checked him out just twenty-five minutes earlier. Security? More like moronity.

The door to the Egyptian gallery whispered shut and he strode down the length of the hall, turned into the annex—and was surprised to find the doors to the tomb shut before him.

A suspicion took root in his mind: had Lipper gone and done the first run without him? But he quickly dismissed it. Lipper, though a fussy artiste type and cranky as hell, was basically a cool guy.

He fumbled out his key card and swiped it, hearing the locks disengage. Still balancing the pizzas and drinks, he got an elbow into the door and shoved it open, then slipped through, the door clicking shut behind him.

The lights had dimmed to level 1—the level they would be at after a run—and once again, DeMeo felt a stab of suspicion.

“Hey, Jayce!” he called out. “Pizza delivery!”

His voice echoed and died away.

“Jayce!”

He descended the staircase, walked down the corridor, and went as far as the bridge over the well before pausing again.

“Jayce! Pizza time!”

He listened while the echoes died away. Lipper wouldn’t have done an initial test run without him: not after all the time they’d put in on the project together. He wasn’t that much of an asshole. He probably had his earphones on, checking the sound track or something. Or maybe he was listening to his iPod—sometimes he did that while working. DeMeo ventured across the bridge and entered their main work area in the Hall of the Chariots.

As he did so, he heard a distant footstep. At least he thought it was a footstep. But it had made an odd thumping sound. It came from deeper within the tomb, probably the burial chamber.

“That you, Jayce?” For the first time, DeMeo felt a creeping sense of alarm. He put the pizzas down on the worktable and took a few steps toward the Hall of Truth and the burial chamber beyond. He could see that it was quite dark—still at level 1 lighting, like the rest of the tomb. He couldn’t see a damn thing, to tell the truth.

He went back to the worktable, looked at the computer. It was fully booted, the software loaded and waiting in standby mode. He moused over to the lighting icon, trying to remember how to raise the light levels. Lipper had done it a hundred times, but he’d never paid much attention. There were some software sliders visible in an open window and he clicked the one labeled Hall of the Chariots.

Christ! The lights dimmed, sending the disquieting Egyptian carvings and stone statuary even further into gloom. He quickly

moused the slider in the other direction, and the lights intensified. Then he began brightening the lights in the rest of the tomb.

He heard a thump and turned with a jerk. “Jayce?”

It had definitely come from the burial chamber.

DeMeo laughed. “Hey, Jayce, c’mere. I got the pizzas.”

There was that strange noise again: Draaaaag-thump. Draaaaag-thump. As if somebody, or some thing, was dragging one limb.

“It sounds just like The Mummy’s Curse. Ha, ha, Jayce—good one!”

No answer.

DeMeo, still chuckling, turned from the computer and strode through the Hall of Truth. He turned his eyes away from the squatting form of Ammut—something about the Egyptian god, the eater of hearts with a crocodile head and lion’s mane, creeped him out even worse than the rest of the tomb.

He paused beyond the door to the burial chamber. “You’re a funny guy, Jayce.”

He waited for Lipper’s laugh, for the sight of his skinny form emerging from behind a pilaster. But there was nothing. The silence was absolute. With a nervous swallow, he ducked inside, peered about the tomb.

Nothing. The other doors leading away from the burial chamber were dark—they weren’t part of the computer lighting scheme. Lipper must be hiding in one of those rooms, preparing to jump out and scare him half to death.

“Hey, Jayce, come on. The pizzas are cold and getting colder.”

The lights suddenly went out.

“Hey!”

DeMeo spun around, but the tomb doglegged at the Hall of Truth and he could not see back into the Hall of the Chariots—nor could he see the comforting blue glow of the LCD screen.

He spun again, hearing the strange, dragging footfalls behind

him, moving closer now.

“This isn’t funny, Jay.”

He felt for his flashlight—but of course he wasn’t carrying it; it was back in the chariots hall, on the table. Why couldn’t he see the indirect glow of the LCD? Had the power been cut as well? The darkness was total.

“Look, Jay, cut the crap. I’m serious.”

He shuffled backward in the dark, came up against one of the pillars, began feeling his way around it. The steps drew still closer.

Draaaag-thump. Draaaag-thump.

“Jay, come on. Cut the bullshit.”

Suddenly, from closer than he ever expected, he heard the raspy sound of air escaping from a dry throat. A rattle that was almost a hiss, full of something like hatred.

“Jesus!” DeMeo took a step forward and swiped his heavy fist through the air, striking something that shuffled back with another snakelike hiss.

“Stop it! Stop it!”

He both heard and felt the thing rush at him with a high keening sound. He tried to twist aside but felt, with astonishment, a terrible blow. Searing heat knifed through his chest. With a shriek, he fell backward, clawing at the darkness, and as he hit the ground, he felt something heavy and cold stamp on his throat and bear down with shocking weight. He lashed about with his hands as he heard the bones crackling in his neck and a sudden, dazzling explosion of urine-colored light flashed in his eyes—and then nothing.

Chapter 19

The large, elegant library in Agent Pendergast's mansion on Riverside Drive was the last room one would expect to call crowded. And yet—D'Agosta reflected moodily—there was no other word for it this evening. Tables, chairs, and much of the floor were covered with plats and diagrams. Half a dozen easels and whiteboards had been erected, showing schematics, maps, routes of ingress and egress. The low-tech reconnaissance they had conducted of Herkmoor a few nights earlier had now been enhanced by high-tech remote surveillance, including false-color satellite images in radar and infrared wavelengths. Boxes lay shoved against one wall, overflowing with printouts, data dumps from computer probes of the Herkmoor network, and aerial photographs of the prison complex.

In the middle of the controlled chaos sat Glinn, nearly motionless in his wheelchair, speaking quietly in his usual monotone. He had begun the meeting with a crushingly detailed analysis of Herkmoor's physical plant and security measures. D'Agosta needed no convincing there: if any prison was escape-proof, it was Herkmoor. The old-fashioned defenses like redundant guard posts and triple fencing had been bolstered by cutting-edge instrumentation, including laser-beam "lattices" at every exit, hundreds of digital videocams, and a network of passive listening devices set into the walls and ground, ready to pick up anything from digging to stealthy footsteps. Every prisoner was required to wear an ankle bracelet with an embedded GPS device, which broadcast the prisoner's location to a central command unit. If the bracelet were cut, an alarm would immediately sound and an automatic lockdown sequence would begin.

As far as D'Agosta was concerned, Herkmoor was invincible.

From there, Glinn had segued to the next step in the escape plan. And this was where D'Agosta's simmering unease had boiled over. Not only did the idea seem simplistic and inept, but, even worse, it turned out that he, D'Agosta—and he alone—was the man assigned to carry it out.

He glanced around the library, waiting impatiently for Glinn to finish. Wren had arrived earlier that evening with a set of architectural plans of the prison, "borrowed" from the private records section of the New York Public Library, and now he hovered around

Constance Greene. With his luminous eyes and almost translucent skin, the man looked like a cave creature, paler even than Pendergast... if that were possible.

Next, D'Agosta's gaze fell on Constance. She sat at a side table opposite Wren, a stack of books before her, listening to Glinn and taking notes. She was wearing a severe black dress with a row of tiny pearl buttons in the back, running from the base of her spine up to the nape of her neck. D'Agosta found himself wondering who had buttoned them up for her. More than once, he had caught her privately stroking one hand over the other, or gazing into the fire that crackled on the huge grate, lost in thought.

She's probably as skeptical about all this as I am, he thought. Because as he looked around at their little foursome—Proctor, the chauffeur, was unaccountably absent—he couldn't imagine a group less suited for such a daunting task. He had never really liked Glinn and his smooth arrogance, and he wondered if the man had finally met his match with the Herkmoor penitentiary.

There came a pause in Glinn's drone, and he turned toward D'Agosta.

"Do you have any questions or comments so far, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah. A comment: the scheme is crazy."

"Perhaps I should have phrased the question differently. Do you have any comments of substance to make?"

"You think I can just waltz in, make a spectacle of myself, and get out scot-free? This is Herkmoor we're talking about. I'll be lucky not to end up in the cell next to Pendergast."

Glinn's expression did not change. "As long as you stick to the script, there will be no problems and you will get off 'scot-free.' Everything has been planned down to the last eventuality. We know exactly how the guards and prison personnel will react to your every move." Glinn suddenly smiled, his thin lips stretching mirthlessly. "That, you see, is Herkmoor's fatal weakness. That and those GPS bracelets, which show the position of every inmate in the entire prison at the touch of a key... a most foolish innovation."

"If I go in there and make a scene, won't it put them on alert?"

"Not if you follow the script. There is some critical information

which only you can get. And some prep work that only you can do.”

“Prep work?”

“I’ll get to that shortly.”

D’Agosta felt his frustration rise. “Pardon my saying so, but all your planning isn’t going to mean jack once I’m inside those walls. This is the real world, and people are unpredictable. You can’t know what they’re going to do.”

Glinn looked at him without moving. “You’ll forgive me for contradicting you, Lieutenant, but human beings are disgustingly predictable. Especially in an environment like Herkmoor, where the rules of behavior are mapped out in excruciating detail. The scheme may seem simple, even inane, to you. But that’s its power.”

“It’s just going to get me into deeper shit than I am already.”

After dropping this epithet, he glanced at Constance. But the young woman was staring into the fire with her strange eyes, not even seeming to have heard.

“We never fail,” Glinn said, remaining unnervingly calm and neutral. “That’s our guarantee. All you need to do, Lieutenant, is follow instructions.”

“I’ll tell you what we really need: a pair of eyes on the inside. You can’t tell me none of those guards can be turned—blackmailed, whatever. Christ, prison guards are one step away from being criminals themselves, at least in my experience.”

“Not these guards. Any attempt to turn one would be foolhardy.” Glinn wheeled himself over to a desk. “If I told you we had somebody on the inside, however, would it reassure you?”

“Hell, yes.”

“Would it secure your cooperation? Silence all these doubts?”

“If the source was reliable, yeah.”

“I believe you will find our source to be above reproach.” And with that, Glinn picked up a single piece of paper and handed it to D’Agosta.

D’Agosta glanced over the sheet. It contained a long column of

numbers, with two corresponding times linked to each number.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“A schedule of guard patrols in the solitary unit during lockdown, from ten P.M. to six A.M. And this is just one of the many useful pieces of information that have come our way.”

D’Agosta stared in disbelief. “How the hell did you get it?”

Glinn allowed himself a smile—at least D’Agosta thought the faint thinning of the lips was a smile. “Our inside source.”

“And who might that be, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“You know him well.”

Now D’Agosta was even more surprised. “Not—?”

“Special Agent Pendergast.”

D’Agosta slumped in his chair. “How did he get this to you?”

This time a true smile broke over Glinn’s features. “Why, Lieutenant, don’t you remember? You brought it out.”

“Me?”

Glinn reached behind the desk, pulled out a plastic box. Looking inside, D’Agosta was surprised to see some of the trash he’d collected in his recon of the prison perimeter—gum wrappers and scraps of linen—now carefully dried, pressed, and mounted between sheets of archival plastic. When he looked closely at the linen scraps, he could just make out faint markings.

“There’s an old drain in Pendergast’s cell—as in most of the older cells at Herkmoor—which was never hooked into the modern sewage treatment system. It drains into a catchment basin outside the prison walls, which in turn empties into Herkmoor Creek. Pendergast writes us a message on a scrap of trash, sticks it into the drain, and washes it down with water from the sink, which ends up in the creek. Simple. We discovered it because the DEP had recently cited Herkmoor for the water-quality violation.”

“What about ink? Writing equipment? Those are the first things they’d have taken away.”

“Frankly, I don’t know how he’s doing it.”

There was a short silence.

“But you knew he’d communicate with us,” D’Agosta said at last in a quiet voice.

“Naturally.”

Despite himself, D’Agosta was impressed. “Now, if there was only some way to get information to Pendergast.”

Wry amusement flickered briefly in Glinn’s eyes. “As soon as we knew what cell he was in, that was simplicity itself.”

Before D’Agosta could respond, a sudden noise rose in the library: a faint, urgent squeaking, coming from the direction of Constance. D’Agosta looked over in time to see her picking up a small white mouse from the carpet, which had apparently fallen from her pocket. She calmed it with soft words, petting it softly, before returning the mouse to its hiding place. Sensing the silence in the room and the eyes upon her, she looked up, coloring suddenly.

“What a delightful little pet,” Wren said after a moment. “I didn’t know you were fond of mice.”

Constance smiled nervously.

“Wherever did you get it, my dear?” Wren went on, his voice high and tense.

“I... found it in the basement.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Among the collections. The place is overrun.”

“It seems awfully tame. And one doesn’t usually find white mice running around loose.”

“Perhaps it was somebody’s pet that escaped,” she said with some irritation, and rose. “I’m tired. I hope you’ll excuse me. Good night.”

After she had left, there was a moment of silence, and then Glinn spoke again, his voice low. “There was another message from Pendergast in those papers—urgent—not relating to the matter at hand.”

“What was it about?”

“Her. He asked that you, Mr. Wren, keep a careful watch over her during the daytime—when you are not sleeping, of course. And that when you leave for your nighttime job at the library, you make sure the house is secure, and she in it.”

Wren seemed pleased. “Of course, of course! Glad to, very glad indeed.”

Glinn’s eye turned to D’Agosta. “Even though you’re living in the house, he asked if you could make it a point to drop in and check on her from time to time during working hours as well.”

“He seems worried.”

“Very.” Glinn paused, then opened a drawer and began to remove items and place them on the desk: a hip flask of whiskey, a computer flash drive, a roll of duct tape, a rolled-up sheet of mirrored Mylar plastic, a capsule of brown liquid, a hypodermic needle, a small pair of wire cutters, a pen, and a credit card.

“And now, Lieutenant, let us go over the prep work you will be expected to accomplish once you are inside Herkmoor...”

Later on—once all the maps and boxes and charts had been packed away, and as D’Agosta was seeing Glinn and Wren out at the mansion’s front door—the old librarian lingered behind.

“Listen a moment, if you would,” he said, plucking at D’Agosta’s sleeve.

“Sure,” D’Agosta said.

Wren leaned in close, as if to impart a secret. “Lieutenant, you are not familiar with the—the circumstances of Constance’s past existence. Let me just say that they are... unusual.”

D’Agosta hesitated, surprised by the look of agitation in the strange man’s eyes. “Okay,” he said.

“I know Constance well: I was the person who found her in this house, where she’d been hiding. She has always been scrupulously honest—sometimes painfully so. But tonight, for the first time, she lied.”

“The white mouse?”

Wren nodded. “I have no idea what it means, except that I’m convinced she’s in some kind of trouble. Lieutenant, she’s an emotional house of cards, just waiting for a puff of wind. We both need to keep a close eye on her.”

“Thank you for the information, Mr. Wren. I’ll check in as frequently as I can.”

Wren held his gaze for a moment, staring at him with remarkable urgency. Then he nodded, grasped D’Agosta’s hand briefly in his own bony claw, and vanished into the chill darkness.

Chapter 20

The prisoner known only as A sat on the bunk in solitary 44, deep within the Federal High-Risk Violent Offender Pretrial Detention Facility—the Black Hole—of Herkmoor. It was a cell of monastic sparseness, eight feet by ten, with freshly whitewashed walls, a cement floor with a central drain, a toilet in one corner, a sink, a radiator, and a narrow metal bed. A fluorescent bulb, recessed into the ceiling and protected by a wire cage, provided the cell's sole light. There was no switch: the bulb went on at 6 A.M. and went off at 10 P.M. High up on the far wall was the room's only window, deep and barred, two inches wide and fifteen inches high.

The prisoner, dressed in a neatly pressed gray jumpsuit, had been sitting on the mattress for many hours in utter stillness. His slender face was pale and without expression, the silvery eyes half hooded, white-blond hair combed back. Nothing moved, not even his eyes, as he listened to the soft, rapid sounds filtering from the cell next door: solitary 45.

They were the sounds of drumming: a tattoo of extraordinary rhythmic complexity that rose and fell, sped up and slowed down, moving from metal bed rail to mattress to the walls, toilet, sink, bars, and back again. At present, the prisoner was drumming on the iron bedstead rail with an occasional slap or turn played out on the mattress, while making rapid popping and clucking sounds with his lips and tongue. The endless rhythms rose and fell like the wind, working into a machine gun-like frenzy and then dying back into a lazy syncopation. At times, it almost—but not quite—seemed to come to a stop: except that a single ostinato tap... tap... tap indicated that the beat went on.

An aficionado of rhythm might have recognized the extraordinary diversity of rhythmical patterns and styles coming from solitary 45: a kassagbe Congo beat segueing into a down-tempo funk-out and then into a pop-and-lock, moving sequentially through a shakeout, a wormhole, a glam, then into a long pseudo-electroclash riff; then a quick eurostomp ending in a nasty, followed by a hip-hop twist-stick and a tom club. A moment's silence... and then a slow Chicago blues fill began, evolving into innumerable other beats both named and nameless, twining and intertwining in an eternal braid of sound.

The prisoner known as A, however, was not an aficionado of rhythm. He was a man who knew many things—but drumming was not one of them.

And yet he listened.

Finally, half an hour before lights-out, the prisoner known as A shifted on his cot. He turned toward the headrail, gave it a cautious tap with his left index finger, then another. He began tapping out a simple 4/4 beat. As the minutes went on, he tried the beat on the mattress, then the wall and the sink—as if testing them for timbre, tone, and amplitude—before moving back to the bed rail. As he continued to beat out a 4/4 time with his left finger, he began beating a second rhythm with his right. As he played this simple rhythmic accompaniment, he listened intently to the outpouring of virtuosity next door.

Lights-out arrived, and all went black. An hour went by, and another. The prisoner's approach subtly changed. Carefully following the drummer's lead, A picked up an unusual syncopation here, a three-against-two beat there, adding them to his simple repertoire. He meshed his own drumming ever more closely into the web of sounds coming from next door, taking cues from his neighbor, picking up the tempo or lowering it according to the drummer's lead.

Midnight, and the drummer in cell 45 continued—and so did the prisoner named A. A found that drumming—which he had always dismissed as a crude, primitive activity—was curiously pleasing to the mind. It opened a door from the tight, ugly reality of his cell into an expansive, abstract space of mathematical precision and complexity. He drummed on, still following the lead of the prisoner in 45, all the while increasing the complexity of his own rhythmical patterns.

The night wore on. The few other prisoners in solitary—there were not many, and they were far down the hall—were long asleep. Yet still the prisoners in 44 and 45 drummed on together. As the prisoner named A explored more deeply this strange new world of external and internal rhythm, he began to understand something about the man next door and his mental illness—as had been his intent. It was not something that could be put into words; it was not accessible to language; it was not reachable by psychological theorizing, psychotherapy, or even medication.

Yet nevertheless—through careful emulation of the complex drumming—the prisoner in 44 began to reach that place, to enter the

drummer's special world. On a basic neurological level, he began to understand the drummer: what motivated him, why he did what he did.

Slowly, carefully, A took a measured foray into altering the rhythm along certain experimental pathways, to see if he could take the lead, induce the drummer to follow him for a moment. When this experiment proved successful, he very subtly began to alter the tempo, morph the rhythm. There was nothing sudden in his approach: every new beat, every altered rhythm, was carefully controlled and calculated to lead to a desired result.

Over the space of another hour, the dynamic between the two prisoners began to change. Without realizing it, the drummer became no longer the leader, but the follower.

Prisoner A continued to alter his own drumming, slowing it down and speeding it up by infinite degrees, until he was certain he was now setting the rhythm; that the Drummer in the cell next door was unconsciously following his tempo and lead. With infinite care, he then began to slow his own drumming: not in a steady way, but through speedups and slowdowns, through riffs and changeovers he had picked up from his neighbor, each time ending at a slightly slower tempo—until he was beating out a down-tempo as slow and sleepy as molasses.

And then he stopped.

The man in solitary 45, after a few tentative, lost beats, halted as well.

There was a long silence.

And then a breathy, hoarse voice came from cell 45. “Who... who are you?”

“I am Aloysius Pendergast,” came the reply. “And I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

An hour later, blessed silence reigned. Pendergast lay on his bunk, eyes closed but still awake. At a certain moment, he opened his eyes and scrutinized the faintly glowing dial of his watch—the one item prisoners were allowed, by law, to keep. Two minutes to four in the morning. He waited, now with his eyes open, and at exactly four o'clock a brilliant pinpoint of green light appeared on the far wall, dancing and jittering before gradually settling down. He recognized it

as the output of a 532nm green DPSS laser—nothing more than the beam from an expensive laser pen, aimed through his window from some concealed spot far beyond the prison walls.

When the light had stopped trembling, it began blinking, repeating a short introduction in a simple monophonic cipher, compressed to keep transmission short. The introduction was repeated four times, to make sure Pendergast recognized the code. Then, after a pause, the actual message began.

TRANSMISSION RECEIVED

STILL ANALYZING OPTIMAL ROUTES FOR EGRESS

CHANGE OF VENUE MAY BE REQUIRED ON YOUR END

WILL ADVISE ASAP

QUESTIONS FOLLOW—COMMUNICATE VIA PRIOR PROCEDURE

DESCRIBE YARD PRIVILEGES AND SCHEDULE

OBTAIN MATERIAL SAMPLES OF GUARD UNIFORM, SLACKS
AND SHIRT

The requests and questions went on, some strange, some straightforward. Pendergast made no move to take notes, committing everything to memory.

At the last question, however, he started slightly.

ARE YOU WILLING TO KILL?

With that, the laser light vanished. Pendergast rose to a sitting position. Feeling under the mattress, he extracted a hard, frayed piece of canvas and a slice of lemon from a recent meal. Removing one shoe, he carried it to the sink, ran the water, placed a few drops into the soap depression, and dipped the shoe into it. Next, he squeezed the juice of the lemon slice into the water. With the piece of canvas, he proceeded to strip the shoe of some of its polish. Soon, a small amount of dark liquid stood in the enamel depression. He paused a moment in the gloom to make sure his movements were undetected. Then he unmade the corner of his bed, tore a long strip of sheet from beneath the tuck, laid it out on the rim of the sink. He removed one shoelace, dipped its previously sharpened and split metal edge into the liquid, and began to write in a fanatically small, neat hand,

leaving a pale script on the strip of cotton.

By quarter to five, he had finished answering the questions. He laid the sheet on the radiator until it was baking hot, which darkened and fixed the writing; then he began to roll it up. But as he did so, he paused, and then added one more small line at the bottom: "Continue to keep a close eye on Constance. And be of good cheer, my dear Vincent."

He baked on this last part of the message, rolled it tight, and inserted it into the drain in his cell. Then he filled his slop bucket at the sink and poured it down the drain, repeating the process a dozen times.

One hour to wake-up. He lay down on the bed, folded his hands across his chest, and went instantly to sleep.

Chapter 21

Mary Johnson swung open the oversize door to the Egyptian gallery and stepped inside, feeling around on the cold marble wall for the light switches. Although she knew the technicians had been working late hours on the tomb recently, by six in the morning they were always gone. It was her job to unlock the area for the subcontractors, turn on the lights, and make sure all was well.

She found the bank of switches and brushed them on with a plump forefinger. Rows of old glass and bronze light fixtures blazed, casting a mellow incandescent glow over the partly refurbished hall. She paused for a moment in the doorway, fists parked on bulging hips, looking around to make sure all was in order. Then she began moving down the hall, her giant butt swaying as she hummed old disco tunes to herself, twirling a ring of keys in her hand. The jangling keys, clicking heels, and off-key voice echoed through the large chamber, creating a reassuring cocoon of noise that had seen her through thirty years of nighttime employment at the New York Museum of Natural History.

She reached the annex, smacked on the bank of lights there, then crossed the echoing space and swiped her card in the new security doors leading to the Tomb of Senef. The locks disengaged and the automatic doors opened with a humming sound, revealing the tomb beyond. She stopped, frowning. Normally, the tomb should be in blackness. But despite the hour, it was brilliantly lit.

Damn techies left the lights on.

She stood in the doorway, pausing. Then she tossed her head and sniffed disdainfully at her own uncertainty. Some of the guards who'd had family working here in the thirties had begun whispering about the tomb being cursed; how it had been boarded up for good reason; how it was a big mistake reopening it. But since when was an Egyptian tomb not cursed? And Mary Johnson prided herself on her brisk, matter-of-fact approach to her job. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it. No bullshit, no whining, no excuses.

Curse, hell.

With a cluck, she descended the broad stone stairs into the tomb,

humming and singing, her voice echoing about the close space.

Stayin' alive, stayin' alive...

She walked across the well, her immense weight swinging the bridge, and passed into the chamber beyond. Here, the computer geeks had set up tables of equipment, and Johnson was careful not to trip on the cables snaking across the floor. She glanced disapprovingly at the greasy pizza boxes carelessly stacked on one table, at the Coke cans and candy bar wrappers lying about. Maintenance wouldn't be through until seven. Well, it wasn't her problem.

In her three decades at the museum, Mary Johnson had seen it all. She'd seen them come and go, she'd been through the museum murders and the subway murders, the disappearance of Dr. Frock, the killing of old Mr. Puck, and the attempted murder of Margo Green. It was the biggest museum in the world and it had proved to be a challenging place to work, in more ways than one. Still, the benefits were excellent and the leave was decent. Not to mention the prestige.

She moved on, passing into the Hall of the Chariots, stopping for a cursory visual check, and then stuck her head into the burial chamber. All seemed in order. She was on the verge of turning back when she caught the whiff of something sour. Her nose wrinkled instinctively as she searched for its source. There, on one of the nearby pillars, was a splatter of something wet and chunky.

She raised her radio. "M. Johnson calling Central. Do you read?"

"This is Central. Ten-four, Mary."

"We need a cleanup crew down here in the Tomb of Senef. Burial chamber."

"What's the problem?"

"Vomit."

"Christ. Not the night guards again?"

"Who knows? Maybe the techies, having themselves a big old time."

"We'll get maintenance on it."

Johnson snapped the radio off and did a brisk turn around the

perimeter of the burial chamber. In her experience, piles of vomit seldom dropped alone: better to find out the rest of the bad news right away. Despite her size, she was a very fast walker, and she had completed more than half the circuit when her left shoe skidded on the slick floor and her momentum carried her sideways and down, landing her hard on the polished stone.

“Crap!”

She sat there, shaken but unhurt. She’d slipped in a puddle of something dark and coppery-smelling, and she’d broken the fall with both hands. When she held her hands up, she immediately recognized the substance as blood.

“Lord almighty.”

She rose with care, looked around automatically for something to wipe her hands on, found nothing, and decided to go ahead and wipe them on her pants, since they were already ruined. She unhooked her radio.

“Johnson calling Central, do you read?”

“Roger that.”

“Got a pool of blood here, too.”

“What’s that you say? Blood? How much?”

“Enough.”

A silence. From the large pool of blood she’d slipped in, a dribbling trail of splatters led toward the huge, open granite sarcophagus that stood in the center of the room. The flank of the sarcophagus, engraved in hieroglyphics, had a prominent smear of gore along its side, as if something had been hoisted over and dropped inside.

Suddenly, the very last thing in the world Johnson wanted to do was look inside that sarcophagus. But something—perhaps her strong sense of duty—made her walk slowly forward. Her radio, held unheeded in one hand, squawked.

“Enough?” Central squawked again in a high voice. “What’s that supposed to mean, enough?”

She reached the lip of the sarcophagus and looked inside. A body lay on its back. The body was human—that much she knew—but beyond that, she could tell nothing. The face was gashed and scored beyond recognition. The breastbone was split and the ribs yanked open like a set of double doors. Where the lungs and other organs should be was nothing but a red cavity. But what would really stick with her, and haunt her nightmares for years to come, was the pair of electric-blue Bermuda shorts the victim wore.

“Mary?” came the squawking radio.

Johnson swallowed, unable to answer. Now she noticed a smaller trail of blood and gore, dribbling its way into one of the small rooms that branched off from the burial chamber. The mouth of the room was dark and she couldn’t see inside.

“Mary? Do you read?”

She slowly lifted the radio to her lips, swallowed again, found her voice. “I read you.”

“What’s going on?”

But Mary Johnson was slowly backing away from the sarcophagus, eyes on the little dark doorway in the far corner. No need to go in there. She’d seen enough. She continued backing up, then carefully turned her bulk around. And then, as she approached the exit to the burial chamber, something seemed to go wrong with her legs.

“Mary! We’re sending security down right away! Mary!”

Johnson took another step, wobbled, then felt herself sink to the ground, as if borne down by an irresistible force. She rolled into a sitting position, then toppled backward almost in slow motion, coming to rest against the door lintel.

That was how they found her, eight minutes later, wide awake and staring at the ceiling, tears rolling out of her eyes.

Chapter 22

Captain of Homicide Laura Hayward arrived after most of the crime scene investigation work had already been completed. She preferred it that way. She had come up through the homicide ranks and knew the scene-of-crime investigators didn't need a captain breathing down their necks to do good work.

At the entrance to the Egyptian gallery, where the crime scene perimeter had been erected, she passed through a knot of police and museum security personnel, talking in hushed, funereal voices. She spotted the museum's security director, Jack Manetti, and nodded at him to accompany her. She stepped up to the tomb's threshold, then paused, breathing in the close and dusty air, taking stock.

"Who was here last night, Mr. Manetti?" she asked.

"I have a list of all authorized employees and subcontractors. There are quite a few, but it seems all of them checked out of the museum through security except two technicians: the victim, and the one who's still missing. Jay Lipper."

Hayward nodded and began walking through the tomb, making a mental note of the progression of the rooms, stairs, passageways, building a three-dimensional image in her head. In a few minutes, she arrived at a large, pillared room. She quickly took it all in: the tables laden with computer equipment, the pizza boxes, the cables and wires running in all directions. Everything was festooned with evidence tags.

A sergeant came to greet her, a man older than her by a decade. She thought his name was Eddie Visconti. He looked competent, had a bright, clear eye, dressed neatly, deferential but only to a point. She knew it was tough for some of the rank and file to report to a woman younger than they were and twice as educated. Visconti looked as if he could handle it.

"You're the first responding officer, Sergeant?"

"Yes, ma'am. Me and my partner."

"All right. Let's have a quick summary."

“Two computer technicians worked late: Jay Lipper and Theodore DeMeo. They’d been working late every night this week—lot of pressure to open the exhibit by deadline.”

She turned to Manetti. “And when’s that?”

“Eight days from today.”

“Proceed.”

“DeMeo went out for pizza at around two, leaving Lipper behind. We checked with the pizzeria—”

“Don’t tell me how you know what you know, Sergeant. Stick to the reconstruction, please.”

“Yes, Captain. DeMeo returned with pizza and drinks. We don’t know if Lipper had already left or if he was attacked in the interim, but we do know they didn’t have time to consume the food.”

Hayward nodded.

“DeMeo put down the pizzas and drinks on that table and went into the burial chamber. It appears the killer was already there, and surprised him.” He walked toward the burial chamber, Hayward following.

“Weapon?” Hayward asked.

“Unknown at this point. Whatever it was, it wasn’t sharp. The cuts and lacerations are very ragged.”

They entered the burial chamber. Hayward took in the extravagant puddle of blood, the smear on the stone coffin, the trail of gore into a side room, the bright yellow tags everywhere like fallen autumn leaves. She glanced around, locating each fleck of blood in turn, noting the shape and size of the droplets.

“A splatter analysis indicates the killer came at the victim from the left side with weapon raised, and brought it down in a way that partially cut through the victim’s neck and severed the jugular vein. The victim fell but the perp continued to slash and cut, far more than necessary to kill. There were more than a hundred cuts to the victim’s neck, head, shoulders, abdomen, legs, and buttocks.”

“Any sign of a sexual motive?”

“No semen or other bodily fluids. Sex organs untouched, anal swab clean.”

“Keep going.”

“It appears the perp half chopped, half punched through the victim’s breastbone with the weapon. Then he pulled out some of the internal organs and carried them into the Canopic Room and dumped them into a couple of very large jars.”

“Did you say pulled out?”

“The viscera were torn away, not cut.”

Hayward walked over to the small side chamber and looked in. A technician was on his hands and knees, photographing spots on the floor with a macro lens. A row of wet-evidence boxes stood against one wall, waiting to be carried away.

She looked around, trying to visualize the attack. She already knew that they were dealing with a disorganized killer, a disturbed individual, most likely a sociopath.

“After cutting out the organs,” Sergeant Visconti continued, “the perp returned to the body, dragged it to the sarcophagus, and heaved it inside. Then he left by the main tomb door.”

“He must’ve been covered with blood.”

“Yes. And in fact, using a bloodhound, we’ve followed the trail as far as the fifth floor.”

Hayward looked up sharply. This was a detail she hadn’t heard before. “Not out of the museum?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“We can’t be sure. But we found something else on the fifth floor. A shoe belonging to the missing technician, Lipper.”

“Is that so? You think the killer’s holding him hostage?”

Visconti grimaced. “Possible.”

“Carrying his dead body?”

“Lipper was a small guy, five seven, about 135. That’s also possible.”

Hayward hesitated, wondering briefly what ordeal Lipper was going through now—or perhaps had already gone through. Then she turned toward Manetti.

“I want this museum sealed,” she said.

The security director was sweating. “It’s ten minutes to opening. We’re talking two million square feet of exhibition space, two thousand staff—you can’t be serious.”

Hayward spoke softly. “If that’s a problem, I can call Commissioner Rocker. He’ll call the mayor, and the decision can come down through official channels—along with the usual shitstorm.”

“That won’t be necessary, Captain. I’ll order the museum sealed. Temporarily.”

She looked around. “Let’s order up a forensic psychological profile.”

“Already done,” said the sergeant.

Hayward gave him an appraising glance. “We haven’t worked together before, have we?”

“No, ma’am.”

“It’s a pleasure.”

“Thank you.”

She turned and walked briskly out of the room and the tomb, the others following. She crossed the length of the Egyptian gallery and approached the knot of people on the far side of the crime scene tape, gestured to Sergeant Visconti. “Are those bloodhounds still on the premises?”

“Yes.”

“I want everyone here who’s available, police and guards alike, to participate in searching this museum from attic to basement. Priority one: find Lipper. Assume he’s alive and a hostage. Priority two: I want the killer. I want them both before the end of the day. Clear?”

“Yes, Captain.”

She paused, as if remembering something. “Who’s in charge of the tomb exhibit?”

“A curator named Nora Kelly,” Manetti replied.

“Get her on the horn, please.”

Hayward’s attention was drawn to a sudden disturbance in the knot of guards and police, a voice raised in anguished pleading. A thin, slope-shouldered man in a bus driver’s uniform wrenched free of two policemen and made a beeline for Hayward, his face distorted by grief.

“You!” he cried. “Help me! Find my son!”

“And you are?”

“Larry Lipper. I’m Larry Lipper. My son is Jay Lipper. He’s missing, and a killer’s on the loose, and I want you to find him!” The man burst into sobs. “Find him!”

The very intensity of his grief halted the two policemen pursuing him.

Hayward took his hand. “That’s just what we’re going to do, Mr. Lipper.”

“Find him! Find him!”

Hayward looked around, spotted an officer she recognized. “Sergeant Casimirovic?”

The woman stepped forward.

Hayward gestured with her chin at Lipper’s father and mouthed, “Help me out here.”

The officer stepped over and, putting her arm around Larry Lipper, eased him away from Hayward. “You come with me, sir, and we’ll find someplace quiet to sit down and wait.” And Sergeant Casimirovic led him, crying loudly but unresisting, back through the crowd.

Manetti was at her side again, radio in hand. “I’ve got Kelly.”

She took the radio, nodding her thanks. “Dr. Kelly? Captain Hayward, NYPD.”

“How can I help?” came the voice.

“The Canopic Room in the Tomb of Senef. What’s that for?”

“That’s where the pharaoh’s mummified organs were stored.”

“Elaborate, please.”

“Part of the mummification process is the removal of the pharaoh’s internal organs for separate mummification and storage in canopic jars.”

“The internal organs, you say?”

“That’s right.”

“Thank you.” Hayward slowly passed the radio back to Manetti, a thoughtful look on her face.

Chapter 23

Wilson Bulke peered down the corridor that ran beneath the roofline of building 12. Dirty brown light struggled to penetrate the wire-mesh glass skylights, which were coated with at least a century of New York City soot. Air ducts and pipes ran in thick bundles on either side, where the rooflines almost touched the floor. Both sides of the long, low space were crammed with old collections—jars of animals floating in preservative, untidy stacks of yellowing journals, plaster models of animals—leaving a narrow passage down the center. It was a crazy, crooked space, with rooflines, pitches, and floor levels that changed half a dozen times just within eyesight. It was like a fun house at the fair, only there was nothing fun about it.

“My legs are killing me,” Bulke said. “Let’s take five.” He eased himself down on an old wooden crate, the excess adipose tissue in his thighs stretching the material with an audible creak.

His partner, Morris, sat down lightly beside him.

“This is bullshit,” said Bulke. “Day’s almost over, and we’re still at it. There’s nobody up here.”

Morris, who never saw the point in disagreeing with anybody, nodded.

“Lemme have another shot of that Jim Beam.”

Morris slipped the hip flask from his pocket and passed it over. Bulke took a slug, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, passed it back. Morris took a delicate sip himself and slid it back in.

“We shouldn’t be working at all today,” said Bulke. “This is supposed to be our day off. We’re entitled to a little refreshment.”

“That’s the way I look at it, too,” said Morris.

“You were smart to bring that along.”

“Never go anywhere without it.”

Bulke glanced at his watch. Four-forty. The light filtering in through the skylights was slowly dying, the shadows deepening in the

corners. Night would be coming soon. And with this section of the attics undergoing repairs and currently without electricity, that meant switching to flashlights, making their search all the more annoying.

Bulke felt the creeping warmth of the whiskey in his gut. He sighed heavily, leaned his elbows on his knees, looked around. “Look at that shit, will you?” He gestured at a series of low metal shelves beneath the eaves, filled with countless glass jars containing jellyfish. “You think they actually study this crap?”

Morris shrugged.

Bulke reached out, fished a jar off the shelf, took a closer look. A whitish blob floated in the amber liquid, amidst drifting tentacles. He gave the jar a quick shake; when the turbulence settled, the jellyfish had been reduced to swirling shreds.

“Broke into a million pieces.” He showed the jar to Morris. “Hope it wasn’t important.” He issued a guffaw and, with a roll of his eyes, shoved the jar back onto the shelf.

“In China, they eat ’em,” said Morris. He was a third-generation museum guard and considered he knew a great deal more about the museum than the other guards.

“Eat what? Jellyfish?”

Morris nodded sagely.

“Frigging Chinese’ll eat anything.”

“They say they’re crunchy.” Morris sniffed, wiped his nose.

“Gross.” Bulke looked around. “This is bullshit,” he repeated. “There’s nothing up here.”

“The thing I don’t get,” Morris said, “is why they’re reopening that tomb, anyway. I told you how my granddad used to talk about something that happened in there back in the thirties.”

“Yeah, you’ve been telling everybody and his brother about that.”

“Something real bad.”

“Tell me some other time.” Bulke glanced at his watch again. If they really thought there was something up there, they would have sent cops—not two unarmed guards.

“You don’t think the killer dragged the body up here?” Morris asked.

“No way. Why the hell would he do that?”

“But the dogs—”

“How could those bloodhounds smell anything up here? The place reeks. They lost the trail down on the fifth floor, anyway—not up here.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I am right. As far as I’m concerned, we’re done up here.” Bulke rose, slapped the dust off his butt.

“What about the rest of the attics?”

“We did ’em all, don’t you remember?” Bulke winked.

“Right. Oh, right. Yeah.”

“There’s no exit up ahead, but there’s a stairwell back a ways. We’ll go down there.”

Bulke turned, began shuffling in the direction from which they’d come. The attic corridor wandered up and down, so tight in places that he had to turn sideways to get through. The museum consisted of dozens of separate buildings joined together, and where they met the floor levels sometimes differed so greatly they had to be linked by metal staircases. They passed through a space filled with leering wooden idols, labeled Nootka Graveposts; another space filled with plaster casts of arms and legs; then yet another filled with casts of faces.

Bulke paused to catch his breath. A twilight gloom had descended. The face casts hung everywhere on the walls, white faces with their eyes closed, each one with a name attached. They all seemed to be Indians: Antelope Killer, Little Finger Nail, Two Clouds, Frost on Grass...

“Think all these are death masks?” asked Morris.

“Death masks? What do you mean, death masks?”

“You know. When you’re dead, they take a cast of your face.”

“I wouldn’t know. Say, how about another shot of Mr. Beam?”

Morris obligingly removed the flask. Bulke took a swig, passed it back.

“What’s that?” Morris asked, gesturing with the flask.

Bulke peered in the indicated direction. A wallet lay tossed in the corner, spread open, credit cards spilling out. He went over, picked it up.

“Shit, there must be two hundred bucks in here. What do we do?”

“Check out who it belongs to.”

“What does that matter? Probably one of the curators.” Bulke searched through, pulled out the driver’s license.

“Jay Mark Lipper,” he read, then looked at Morris. “Oh, shit. That’s the missing guy.”

Feeling a strange stickiness, he looked down at his hand. It was smeared with blood.

Bulke dropped the wallet with a jerk, then kicked it back into the corner with his foot. He felt abruptly nauseous. “Man,” he said in a high, strained voice. “Oh, man...”

“You think the killer dropped it?” Morris asked.

Bulke felt his heart thumping in his chest. He looked around at all the shadowy spaces, the shelves covered with the leering faces of the dead.

“We gotta call Manetti,” said Morris.

“Gimme a moment... Just gimme a moment here.” Bulke tried to think through a fog of surprise and rising fear. “Why didn’t we see this on the way in?”

“Maybe it wasn’t there.”

“So the killer’s up ahead.”

Morris hesitated. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Bulke felt blood pounding in his temples. “If he’s in front of us,

we're trapped. There's no other way out."

Morris said nothing. His face looked yellow in the dim light. He pulled out his radio.

"Morris calling Central, Morris calling Central. Do you read?"

A steady hiss of static.

Bulke tried his radio, but the result was the same. "Jesus, this frigging museum is full of dead spots. You'd think with all the money they've spent on security, they'd put in a few more repeaters."

"Let's start moving. Maybe we'll get reception in another room." And Morris started forward.

"Not that way!" Bulke said. "He's ahead of us, remember?"

"We don't know that. Maybe we missed the wallet on the way in."

Bulke looked down at his bloody hand, the nausea growing in his gut.

"We can't just stay here," Morris said.

Bulke nodded. "All right. But move slowly."

It was now twilight in the attics, and Bulke slipped his flashlight out of its holster and flicked it on. They moved through the doorway to the next attic, Bulke flashing the light around. This space was crammed with elongated heads carved from black volcanic stone, packed so tightly that the two could just squeeze down the center.

"Try your radio," Bulke said in a low voice.

Again, nothing.

The attic corridor took a ninety-degree angle into a tight warren of cubicle-like rooms: rusted metal shelves stacked with cardboard cartons, each carton overflowing with tiny glass boxes. Bulke shone his light over them. Each contained a huge black beetle.

As they reached the end of the third cubicle, a crash came from the darkness ahead of them, dying away in a rattle of falling glass.

Bulke jumped. "Crap! What was that?"

“I don’t know,” said Morris. His voice was trembling and strained.

“He’s ahead of us.”

As they waited, another crash came.

“Jesus, sounds like someone’s trashing the place.”

More shattering glass, followed by a bestial, inarticulate scream.

Bulke backed up, groping for his own radio. “Bulke calling Central! Do you read?”

“This is Central Security, ten-four.”

Crash! Another gargled scream.

“Jesus, we got a maniac up here! We’re trapped!”

“Your location, Bulke?” came the calm voice.

“The attics, building 12! Section 5, maybe 6. Someone’s up here, tearing up the place! We found the missing victim’s wallet, too. Lipper’s. What do we do?”

A hiss of static, the reply breaking up.

“I can’t read you!”

“... retreat... do not engage... back...”

“Retreat where? We’re trapped, didn’t you hear me?”

“... do not approach...”

Another deafening crash, closer this time. The stench of alcohol and dead specimens wafted back through the darkness. Bulke backed up, screaming into the radio. “Send up the cops! Get a SWAT team up here! We’re trapped!”

More static.

“Morris, try yours!”

When Morris didn’t answer, Bulke turned. The radio lay on the floor, and Morris was running like hell down the crooked passageway, away from the noise, disappearing into the gloom.

“Morris! Wait!” Bulke tried to ship the radio, dropped it instead, and heaved along after Morris, putting one huge slow thigh after the other, desperately trying to overcome the inertia of his enormous body. He could hear the tearing, smashing, screaming thing coming up behind him, fast.

“Wait! Morris!”

A shelf covered with specimen jars went over with a massive crash behind him, and there was the sudden ripping stench of alcohol and rotting fish.

“No!”

Bulke lumbered forward as awkwardly as a walrus, groaning with both fear and effort, his fleshy arms and chest jiggling with each footfall.

Another scream, feral and chillingly inhuman, tore the darkness just behind him. He turned but could see nothing in the darkness except the flash of metal, the dim blur of movement.

“Nooooo!”

He tripped and fell, the flashlight hitting the floor and rolling away, the beam wobbling crazily off the rows of jars before spotlighting a gape-mouthed fish floating upside down in a jar. He struggled, clawing the floor, trying to rise, but the screaming thing fell upon him as swiftly as a bat. He rolled, swatting feebly at it, hearing the tearing of cloth and then feeling the sudden biting sting of his flesh being slashed.

“Noooooooooooo—!”

Chapter 24

Nora sat at a small baize-covered table in an open vault of the Secure Area, waiting. She was surprised at how easy it had been to gain access—Menzies had been instrumental in helping her with the paperwork. The fact was that very few curators, even the top ones, were allowed access without jumping through all sorts of bureaucratic hoops. The Secure Area wasn't just used for storing the most valuable and controversial collections—it was also where some of the museum's most sensitive papers were kept. It was a mark of how important the Tomb of Senef was to the museum that she had gotten access so quickly—and after five o'clock, at that, even while the museum was in a state of high alert.

The archivist appeared from the gloomy file room carrying a yellowing folder, placed it in front of her. "Got it."

"Great."

"Sign here."

"I'm expecting my colleague, Dr. Wicherly," she said, signing the form and handing it back to the archivist.

"I have the paperwork for him all ready to go."

"Thank you."

The woman nodded. "I'll lock you in now."

The archivist shut the vault door, leaving Nora in silence. She stared at the slender file, feeling a prickle of curiosity. It was marked simply Tomb of Senef: correspondence, documents, 1933-35.

She opened it. The first item was a typewritten letter, on elaborate stationery with a gold and red embossing. It was written by the Bey of Bolbassa, and it must have been the one described in the newspaper articles Nora had seen, full of assertions that the tomb was cursed—an obvious ploy to get the tomb back for Egypt.

She turned to the next documents: lengthy police reports from one Detective Sergeant Gerald O'Bannion, handwritten in the beautiful script once standard in America. She scanned the reports with interest,

then reviewed the mass of papers beyond: memos and letters to city officials and the police in what appeared to have been a successful effort to squelch the real story described in the police reports and keep it from the press. She paged through the documents, fascinated by the tale they told, finally understanding why the museum had been so anxious to shut down the tomb.

She jumped when a faint tone announced that the vault door was opening. Turning, she saw the sleek, dapper form of Adrian Wicherly, leaning against the metal jamb, smiling.

“Hello, Nora.”

“Hi.”

He straightened up, giving his suit a little tug, adjusting his already perfect Windsor knot. “What’s a nice girl like you doing in a dusty old place like this?”

“Have you signed in?”

“Je suis en règle,” he said with a little laugh, coming forward and leaning over her shoulder. She could smell expensive aftershave and mouthwashed breath. “What have we here?”

The archivist looked in. “Ready to be locked in?”

“Do. Lock us in.” And Wicherly winked at Nora.

“Why don’t you take a seat, Adrian?” she said coolly.

“Don’t mind if I do.” He pulled an old wooden chair up to the table, dusted the seat with a swipe of a silk handkerchief, and eased himself down.

“Any skeletons in the closet?” he asked Nora, leaning in.

“Definitely.”

Wicherly was a bit too close and Nora edged away as subtly as she could. Although Wicherly had initially come across as the acme of good breeding, lately his smarmy winks and fingertip caresses had led her to believe he was operating more on the glandular level than she had initially thought. Still, things had remained on a professional level and she hoped they would continue that way.

“Do tell,” Wicherly said.

"I've just skimmed the documents, so I don't have the full story, but here it is in brief. On the morning of March 3, 1933, the guards arriving to open the tomb realized it had been broken into. A lot of objects were vandalized. The mummy was missing, later found in an adjacent room, badly mutilated. When they looked in the sarcophagus, they found a different body in it. A freshly murdered body, as it happened."

"Amazing! Just like that fellow, what's-his-name. DeMeo."

"Sort of, except the resemblance stops there. The body belonged to Julia Cavendish, a wealthy New York socialite. She just happened to be the granddaughter of William C. Spragg."

"Spragg?"

"He was the man who bought the tomb from the last Baron Rattray and had it shipped to the museum."

"I see."

"Cavendish was a patroness of the museum. She appears to have had a rather notorious reputation as—well, for want of a better term, a female rake."

"How so?"

"She went to bars and picked up young working-class men—longshoremen, stevedores, and the like."

"And did what with them?" Wicherly asked with a leer.

"Use your imagination, Adrian," she said dryly. "Anyway, her body had been mutilated, but the papers don't offer details."

"Strong stuff for the thirties, I should say."

"Yes. The family and the museum were desperate to cover it up—for different reasons, of course—and it seems they managed quite nicely."

"I imagine the press was a bit more cooperative in those days. Not the muckraking chaps we have today."

Nora wondered if Wicherly knew her husband was a reporter. "Anyway, the investigation into Cavendish's murder was still ongoing when it happened again. This time the mutilated body belonged to

Mongomery Bolt, apparently a collateral descendant of John Jacob Astor, a remittance man and a sort of black sheep in the family. The tomb was now being guarded at night, but the murderer sapped the guard before dumping Bolt's body in the sarcophagus. A note was found on the body. There's a copy of it in this file."

She pulled out a yellowed sheet. On it was an Eye of Horus and several other hieroglyphs. Wicherly looked at it in bemusement.

"The Curse of Ammut Strikes All Who Enter," he intoned. "Whoever wrote this was ignorant. The chap barely knew his hieroglyphs. They aren't even drawn properly. A crude fake."

"Yes. They realized that right away." She turned over some more papers. "Here's the police report on that crime."

"The plot thickens." Wicherly winked, edged his seat closer.

"The police took notice of the link to John Jacob Astor. He'd helped finance the installation of the Tomb of Senef. The police began to wonder if someone wasn't taking revenge on those responsible for bringing the tomb to the museum. Naturally, their suspicions fell on the Bey of Bolbassa."

"The fellow who claimed the tomb was cursed."

"Right. He'd gotten the newspapers all stirred up against the museum. Turns out he wasn't even a real bey—whatever that is. There's a report here on his background."

Wicherly picked it up, sniffed. "Former carpet merchant, made a lot of money."

"Again, the museum, along with the Astor family, was able to successfully quash any publicity—except it was impossible to stop the rumors circulating inside the museum itself. In time, the authorities established that the Bey of Bolbassa had returned to Egypt just before the killings, but they suspected he had hired operatives in New York. If he did, though, they were too clever to get caught. And when the third killing occurred—"

"Another?"

"This time it was an elderly lady who lived in the neighborhood. It took them a while to figure out the connection—turns out she was distantly descended from Cahors, the man who originally found the

tomb. By now, the museum was boiling with rumors, and they were spreading to the general populace. Every crank spiritualist, medium, and tarot-card reader was converging on the museum, and New Yorkers were only too eager to believe the tomb was really cursed.”

“Credulous fools.”

“Perhaps. In any case, it just about emptied the museum. The police investigation wasn’t going anywhere, and so the museum decided to take preemptive action. Using the pretext of the construction of the 81st Street station pedestrian tunnel, they closed the tomb and sealed it up. The killings stopped, the rumors gradually died down, and the Tomb of Senef was mostly forgotten.”

“And the murder cases?”

“Never solved. Although they were convinced the bey was behind them, they couldn’t get proof.”

Wicherly rose from his chair. “That’s quite a story, Nora.”

“It certainly is.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“On the one hand, it might make an interesting sidebar to the history of the tomb. But I have a sense the museum wouldn’t be too keen on publicizing it, and I’m not sure I’d like to, either. I’d rather focus on the archaeology, on teaching people about ancient Egypt.”

“I agree with you, Nora.”

“There’s another reason, maybe even more important. This new murder in the museum—it has some resemblances to the old ones. People will talk, rumors will start.”

“Rumors have already started.”

“Well, yes. I’ve been hearing quite a few myself. At any rate, we don’t want anything derailing this opening.”

“Very true.”

“Good. I’ll write Menzies a report, with our recommendation that none of this is relevant and that it shouldn’t be publicized.” She closed the folder. “That settles it, then.”

There was a silence. Wicherly had risen from his seat and was once again standing behind her, glancing down at the scattered papers of the file. He reached over and picked one up, perused it, put it back down. She felt his hand on her shoulder and stiffened.

A moment later, she felt his lips on the nape of her neck, barely touching her skin, caressing her as lightly as a butterfly.

She rose abruptly and turned. He stood close to her, blue eyes flashing. "I'm sorry if I startled you." He smiled, displaying his porcelain rack. "I couldn't help myself. I find you devastatingly attractive, Nora."

He continued smiling at her, radiating self-confidence and charm, elegant and more handsome than any man deserved to be.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I'm married," she said.

"We'll have a grand time and nobody need ever know."

"I will know."

He smiled, put a caressing hand on her shoulder. "I want to make love to you, Nora."

She took a deep breath. "Adrian, you're a charming and intelligent man. I'm sure that many women would like to make love to you, too."

She could see his smile broadening.

"But I'm not one of them."

"But, my lovely Nora—"

"Wasn't that plain enough for you? I haven't the slightest interest in making love to you, Adrian—even if I weren't married."

Wicherly stood there, dumbfounded, his face struggling to comprehend the sudden reversal of his expectations.

"I don't mean to be insulting, just unambiguous, since my earlier efforts to telegraph my lack of interest don't seem to have penetrated. Please don't make me be any more hurtful than necessary."

She saw the blood drain from his face. His easy self-possession vanished for a moment, exposing what Nora had begun to suspect: a

spoiled child blessed with good looks and brilliance, who had developed the firm belief that whatever he wanted, he should get.

He began to stammer something that might have been intended as an apology, and Nora let her voice soften. "Look, Adrian, let's just forget it, okay? This never happened. We'll never mention it again."

"Quite right, yes. Very decent of you, thank you, Nora."

His face was now flaming with embarrassment, and he looked crushed. She couldn't help but feel sorry for him. She wondered if she was perhaps the first woman ever to turn him down.

"I've got a report to write for Menzies," she said as gently and lightly as possible. "And I believe you need a bit of fresh air. Why not take a brisk turn around the museum?"

"Yes, good suggestion, thank you."

"I'll see you in a bit."

"Yes."

And, moving as stiffly as a machine, Wicherly went to the intercom and pressed the button to be released. When the vault door opened, he vanished without another word, and Nora was once again left in peace to take notes and make her report.

Chapter 25

D'Agosta turned the wheel of the meat van and slowed, guiding it out of the woods. Herkmoor rose ahead of him, a brilliant cluster of sodium lights bathing the maze of walls, towers, and cellblocks in an unreal topaz light. As he approached the first set of gates, he continued to slow, passing a cluster of warning signs telling drivers to have their paperwork in order and to expect a search, followed by a list of forbidden items so long it took two billboards to name them all: everything from fireworks to heroin.

D'Agosta took a deep breath, tried to calm his unsettled nerves. He'd been in prisons before, of course, but always on official business. Driving in like this, bent on some extremely unofficial business, was asking for trouble. Real trouble.

He stopped at the first chain-link gate. A guard came out of a pillbox and sauntered over, carrying a clipboard.

"You're early tonight," he said.

D'Agosta shrugged. "It's my first time up here. Left early, in case I got lost."

The guard grunted, shoved the clipboard in the window. D'Agosta attached his paperwork and handed it back. The guard flipped through it with the tip of a pencil, nodding.

"Know the drill?"

"Not really," D'Agosta answered truthfully.

"You'll get this back on your way out. Show your ID at the next checkpoint."

"Gotcha."

The chain-link gate withdrew on wheels, making a rattling noise.

D'Agosta eased forward, feeling his heart hammering in his chest. Glinn claimed to have planned everything down to the last iota—and had, with remarkable ease, secured his employment under an assumed name with the meatpacking company and arranged for him to get this

route. But the fact was, you could never predict what people might do. That was where he and Glinn parted opinion. This little adventure could turn to shit in a heartbeat.

He drove the truck up to the second gate and, once again, a guard came out.

“ID?”

D’Agosta handed him the false driver’s license and permit. The man looked them over. “New man?”

“Yeah.”

“You familiar with the layout?”

“It wouldn’t hurt to hear it again.”

“Go straight through, then bear to the right. When you see the loading dock, back up to the first bay.”

“Got it.”

“You can exit the vehicle to supervise the unloading. You may not handle any of the merchandise or assist prison personnel. Stay with the vehicle at all times. As soon as you’re unloaded, you leave. Understood?”

“Sure.”

The guard spoke briefly into a radio and the final chain-link gate rolled up.

As D’Agosta eased the van through and made the right turn, he slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and removed a pint of Rebel Yell bourbon. He unscrewed the cap and took a slug, swishing it carefully around in his mouth before swallowing. He could feel the fiery bolus burn down his gullet into his stomach. He shook a few drops on his coat for good measure and slipped the bottle back into his jacket pocket.

In a moment, he had backed up to the loading dock. Two men in coveralls were already waiting, and as soon as he unlocked the back, they began off-loading the boxes and sides of frozen meat.

D’Agosta watched, hands in his pockets, whistling tunelessly. He glanced surreptitiously at his watch, then turned to a worker. “Say,

you got a restroom around here?”

“Sorry. Not allowed.”

“But I’ve gotta go.”

“It’s against the rules.” The worker hefted two boxes of meats to his shoulders and disappeared into the back.

D’Agosta buttonholed the next man. “Look, I’ve really gotta go.”

“You heard him. It’s against the rules.”

“Man, please don’t tell me that.”

The man put down his box and stared at D’Agosta with a long, tired look. “When you get out of here, you can piss in the woods. Okay?” He lifted the box.

“It ain’t pissing I got to do.”

“That’s not my problem.” He hoisted up the box and carried it off.

As the first man approached again, D’Agosta stepped in front of him, blocking his access and breathing heavily into the man’s face. “This is no joke. I need to pinch one off, and I mean now.”

The man wrinkled up his nose and stepped back. He glanced at his fellow worker. “He’s been drinking.”

“What’s that?” D’Agosta said belligerently. “What did you say?”

The man returned the look coolly. “I said, you’ve been drinking.”

“Bullshit.”

“I can smell it.” He turned to his co-worker. “Get the super.”

“What the hell for? You gonna give me a Breathalyzer?”

The other worker disappeared and a moment later he came back with a tall, grim-looking man incongruously dressed in a black blazer, with a belly that hung over his belt like a sack of grain.

“What seems to be the problem?” the supervisor asked.

“I think he’s been drinking, sir,” said the first worker.

The man hooked up his belt and stepped toward D'Agosta. "That right?"

"No, it isn't right!" D'Agosta said, getting in his face and breathing hard with indignation.

The man backed off, unshipped his radio.

"Look, I'm leaving," D'Agosta said, trying to make himself sound suddenly accommodating. "I've got a long drive to get back to the warehouse. This place is in the middle of frigging nowhere and it's six o'clock at night."

"You're not going anywhere, pal." The supervisor spoke briefly into the radio, then turned to one of the workers. "Take him into staff dining and have him wait there."

"Come this way, sir."

"This is bullshit. I'm not going anywhere."

"Come this way, sir."

Grudgingly, D'Agosta followed the guard through the loading dock and into a large pantry, empty, dark, and smelling strongly of Clorox. They passed through a door in the far wall into a smaller room where, it seemed, the kitchen staff took their own meals when they were not on shift.

"Have a seat."

D'Agosta sat down at one of the stainless-steel tables. The man took a seat at the next table, folded his arms, looked away. A few minutes passed and the supervisor returned, an armed guard at his side.

"Stand up," the super said.

D'Agosta complied.

The super turned toward the guard. "Search him."

"You can't do that! I know my rights, and—"

"And this is a federal prison. It's all spelled out on the signs in front, if you bothered to read them. We have the right to search anyone at will."

“Don’t you frigging touch me.”

“Sir, at the moment, you’ve got a medium-sized problem. If you don’t cooperate, you’re going to have a big problem.”

“Yeah? What kind of a problem?”

“How does resisting a federal law enforcement officer sound? Now, last time: raise your arms.”

After a moment’s hesitation, D’Agosta did as he was ordered. A pat-down quickly brought to light the pint bottle of Rebel Yell.

The guard pulled out the bottle, shaking his head sadly. He turned to the supervisor. “What now?” he asked.

“Call the local police department. Have them pick him up. A drunk driver is their problem, not ours.”

“But I just took one sip!”

The supervisor turned back. “Sit down and shut up.”

D’Agosta sat down again a little unsteadily, muttering to himself.

“And the truck?” the guard asked.

“Call his company. Have them send someone to pick it up.”

“It’s after six, there won’t be any management there, and—”

“Call them in the morning, then. The truck isn’t going anywhere.”

“Yes, sir.”

The supervisor glanced at the guard. “Stay here with him until the police arrive.”

“Yes, sir.”

The supervisor left. The guard sat down at the farthest table, eyeing D’Agosta balefully.

“I gotta go to the head,” said D’Agosta.

The guard sighed heavily but said nothing.

“Well?”

The guard rose, scowling. "I'll take you."

"You gonna hold my hand while I take a dump, or can I do it by myself?"

The scowl deepened. "It's just down the hall, second door on the right. Hurry it up."

D'Agosta rose with a flabby sigh and walked slowly to the lunchroom door, opened it, and staggered through, holding on to the doorknob for support. As soon as the door closed, he turned left and ran silently down a long, empty corridor past a series of fortified lunch-rooms, barred doors all standing open. He ducked into the last one and yanked off the white driver's uniform, revealing a light tan shirt, which, with the dark brown pants he was wearing, gave him an uncanny resemblance to a typical Herkmoor guard. He stuffed the old shirt into a trash can at the door. Continuing down the hall, he passed a lit station. He nodded to the two officers as he walked by.

Beyond the station, he slipped a specially modified pen from his pocket, pulled off the cap, and began walking down the corridor, holding it in his hand, videotaping. He walked easily, nonchalantly, like a guard on his rounds, moving the pen this way and that, giving special attention to the placement of the security cameras and other high-tech sensing devices.

At last he ducked into a men's room, headed to the second-to-last stall, and closed the door. Digging into the crotch of his pants, he pulled out a small, sealed plastic bag and a small roll of duct tape. He stood on the toilet, lifted a ceiling tile, and used the duct tape to affix the bag to the upper side of the tile. Then he lowered the tile back in place. Score one to Eli Glinn. The man had insisted the pat-down would stop as soon as the bottle of booze was discovered—and he had been right.

Exiting the bathroom, D'Agosta continued down the hall. Moments later, he heard an alarm go off—not a loud one, just a high-pitched beeping. He walked to the end of the empty corridor, where he was confronted by a set of double doors with a magnetic security lock. Here, he removed his wallet, took out a certain credit card, and swiped it through the door.

A light turned green and he heard the whir and click of the lock disengaging.

Score another to Glinn. He quickly ducked through.

He was now in a small exercise yard, empty at this late hour, with high cinder-block walls on three sides and a chain-link fence on the other. He looked around, verifying that there was no security camera watching him: as Glinn had pointed out, even a prison as high-tech as Herkmoor had to limit its cameras to the most vital areas.

D'Agosta strolled around the yard quickly, videotaping all the while. Then, returning the pen to his pocket, he stepped toward one wall, loosened his belt and unzipped his pants, and removed a rolled sheet of Mylar, which had been strapped to the inside of his leg. He glanced over his shoulder, then stuffed the Mylar tube into a drainpipe in the corner of the yard, hooking it in place with a bent bobby pin.

This accomplished, he moved to the chain-link fence, put a hand on it, pulled at it gingerly. This was the part he really, really wasn't looking forward to.

Pulling a small pair of wire cutters from his socks, he snipped a three-foot vertical row of the chain links, directly behind one of the metal fence posts. He made sure the cut ends rejoined, the fence looking fully intact, and then he lobbed the wire cutters onto the nearest roof, where it would be a long time before they were found. He walked along the fence for half a dozen yards, taking a steadying breath, then another. Looking through the chain link, he could see the vague forms of the guard towers in the darkness beyond. He swallowed, rubbed his hands together. And then he hoisted himself up the chain link and began to climb.

Halfway up, he saw a colored wire strip woven through the chain link. As he passed it, a shrill alarm went off in the yard. Half a dozen sodium vapor lights snapped on around him. There was an immediate response from the guard towers along the perimeter: lights swiveled around, and in a moment they located him on the fence. He continued to climb to the top, and then, steadying himself, and concealing the movement with his arm, he pulled the pen from his pocket, aimed it through the link, and began videotaping the no-man's-land beyond and below him, now starkly illuminated by the lights focused on him.

"You are under surveillance!" came a bullhorned voice from the nearest tower. "Stop immediately!"

From over his shoulder, D'Agosta saw six guards burst into the yard and run like hell toward him. He replaced the pen in his pocket and glanced along the top edge of the fence. Two wires ran through the chain link here, one white, the other red. He grasped the red one,

yanked as hard as he could.

Another alarm went off.

“Halt!”

The guards had reached the bottom of the fence and were climbing up after him. He felt first one, then two, then half a dozen hands grasping at his feet and legs. After a brief show of struggle, he let himself be dragged back down into the yard.

Guns drawn, they surrounded him in a circle. “Who the hell is this?” one barked. “Who are you?”

D’Agosta sat up. “I’m the truck driver,” he said, slurring his words.

“The what?” another guard said.

“I just heard about this one. He did the meat delivery, got pulled off because he was drunk.”

D’Agosta groaned and cradled his arm. “You hurt me.”

“Jesus, you’re right. He’s drunk as a lord.”

“I just took one sip.”

“On your feet.”

D’Agosta tried to rise, staggered. One of them caught his forearm and helped him up. There was a snicker. “He thought he was going to escape.”

“Come on, pal.”

The guards escorted him back to the kitchen, where his guard was standing, red-faced, along with the supervisor.

The super rounded on him. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

D’Agosta slurred his words. “Got lost on the way to the john. Decided to blow the joint.” He gave a drunken laugh.

More snickers.

The supervisor was not amused. "How did you get out into the yard?"

"What yard?"

"Outside."

"I dunno. Door was unlocked, I guess."

"That's impossible."

D'Agosta shrugged, slumped down in the chair, and promptly nodded off.

"Go check the yard 4 access," the supervisor snapped at one of the guards. Then he turned back to the first guard. "You stay here with him. Do you understand? Don't let him go anywhere. Let him shit his pants if necessary."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank Christ he didn't make it over the fence and into no-man's-land. Do you know what a paperwork headache that would have caused?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

D'Agosta noticed, to his great relief, that in the confusion and commotion, nobody noticed his shirt was a different color than before. Score three to Glinn.

At that moment, two local cops came in, looking bewildered. "This the guy?"

"Yeah." The guard prodded D'Agosta with his riot stick. "Wake up, asshole."

D'Agosta roused himself, stood up.

The policemen seemed at a loss. "So what do we do? We gotta sign something?"

The supervisor wiped his brow. "What do you do? Lock him up for drunk driving."

One of the policemen removed a notebook. "Break any laws on the premises? You filing any charges?"

A short silence followed, the guards glancing at each other.

“No,” said the supervisor. “Just get him the hell out of here. After that, he’s your headache. I don’t want to see him around here, ever again.”

He shut the notebook. “All right, we’ll take him downtown, give him a Breathalyzer. Come on, pal.”

“I’ll pass! I only took one sip!”

“If that’s the case, you don’t have much to worry about, now, do you?” said the cop wearily as he led D’Agosta out the door.

Chapter 26

Captain of Homicide Laura Hayward arrived on the scene a minute or two after the paramedics. She could hear the shrieks of the victim ringing down through the attic rooms, and they warmed her heart: nobody who was going to be dead any time soon could squall that lustily.

She ducked through a series of low doors until she arrived at the crime scene tape. With relief, she saw it was Sergeant Visconti and his partner, an officer named Martin.

“Brief me,” she said as she approached.

“We were the closest team to the attack,” Visconti replied. “We scared off the perp. He was bent over the victim, working him over. When he saw us approaching, he fled back into the attics.”

“Get a look at him?”

“Just a shadow.”

“Weapon?”

“Unknown.”

She nodded.

“We also found Lipper’s wallet,” Visconti gestured with his chin toward a plastic evidence box, lined up with several others just outside the tape.

Hayward leaned over, opened the box. “I want a full battery on the wallet and everything inside—DNA, latents, trace fibers, the works. And freeze a dozen swabs of blood and a dozen of organics for future workups.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Is the other guard around, what’s-his-name—Morris? I’d like to talk to him.”

Visconti spoke into his radio, and a moment later a cop appeared

at the far edge of the scene, leading the other guard. The man's comb-over was in disarray, hanging like a flap down the side of his head, and his clothes were disheveled. He stank of alcohol preservative.

"You okay?" she asked. "Able to talk?"

"I think so." His voice was high and breathy.

"Did you see the attack?"

"No. I was... too far away, and my back was turned."

"But you must have seen or heard something in the moments before it occurred."

Morris struggled to concentrate. "Well, there was this... screaming. Like an animal. And breaking glass. Then something came rushing out from the darkness..." His voice trailed off.

"Something? It wasn't a person?"

Morris's eyes slid from side to side. "It was just, like, a screaming, rushing shape."

Hayward turned to another of the officers. "Take Mr. Morris downstairs and have Detective Sergeant Whittier question him further."

"Yes, Captain."

Two EMTs came into view from behind a mountain of stacked boxes, pushing a stretcher with an enormous, groaning mound on top.

"What's his state?" she asked.

"Lacerated with what looks like a crude knife, or maybe a claw."

"Claw?"

The technician shrugged. "Some of the cuts are pretty ragged. Luckily, none of them reached vital organs—one advantage to being fat. Some blood loss, shock... He'll recover."

"Can he talk?"

"You're welcome to give it a shot," said an EMT. "He's been sedated."

Hayward leaned over. The guard's damp, bulging face stared at the ceiling. The smell of liquor, formaldehyde, and dead fish assaulted her nostrils.

She spoke gently. "Wilson Bulke?"

His eyes flickered toward her, away again.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions."

No clear response.

"Mr. Bulke, did you see your attacker?"

The eyes gyrated in their sockets, and his wet mouth opened.
"The... face."

"What face? What did it look like?"

"Twisted... Oh, God..."

He groaned, mumbled something unintelligible.

"Can you be more specific, sir? Male or female?"

A whimper, a brief shake of the head.

"One, or more than one?"

"One," came the croaked reply.

Hayward looked at the EMT. He shrugged.

She turned, gestured to a detective waiting nearby. "Stay with him on the way to the hospital. If he becomes more coherent, get a complete description of his attacker. I want to know what we're up against."

"Yes, Captain."

She straightened up, looked around at the small group of police. "Whoever or whatever this is, we've got it cornered. I want us to go in. Now."

"Shouldn't we call for a SWAT team?" said Visconti.

"It would take hours before a SWAT team could gear up and get

over here. And their rules of engagement are so ponderous they'd slow everything down. There was fresh blood on that wallet—there's a chance Lipper might still be alive and a hostage." She looked around. "I want you three to come with me: Sergeant Visconti, Officer Martin, and Detective Sergeant O'Connor."

There was a silence. The three officers exchanged glances.

"Is there a problem? It's four against one."

More hesitant looks.

She sighed. "Don't tell me you boys have bought into the rumors the museum guards are spreading? What, you think we're going to get jammed up by a mummy?"

Visconti colored, and by way of answer removed his weapon and gave it a quick check. The others followed suit.

"Turn off your radios, cell phones, pagers, everything. I don't want to be creeping up on the perp and suddenly hear Beethoven's Fifth coming from your BlackBerry."

They nodded.

Hayward took out a photocopy she'd requested of the attic layout of the museum and pressed it flat on a box. "Okay. This section of the attic is divided into sixteen narrow rooms—here—divided into two long lines under parallel roofs, with a connecting passage at the far end. Think of it as a U. Besides the stairway down, there's only one possible escape route: a rooftop accessible through this row of windows, here. I've already had it covered. The skylights are supposed to be barred. Which means the only way for the killer to escape is through us... He's cornered."

She paused, looked at them each in turn. "We advance in pairs: quick observation of each room and retreat, then move and cover. I'll partner with O'Connor. Martin, you and Visconti stay a half-room behind. Don't overcommit. And remember: we've got to proceed under the assumption—the hope—that Lipper's still alive and being held hostage. We can't risk killing him. Only if you have verification that Lipper's already wasted can you use deadly force—and then only if absolutely necessary. Are we clear on this?"

They all nodded.

“I’ll lead.”

When none of the three protested or made the usual faux-gallant comments about its being a job for a man, Hayward took it as a sign that women were finally being accepted in the force. Or maybe the three were just scared silent.

They stepped carefully through the crime scene, Hayward leading, O’Connor at her heels. The floor was smeared with blood, and a shelf of specimen jars lay where it had fallen, shards of glass and the broken, putrid remains of eels scattered in puddles of foul-smelling preservative. They moved past the guard at the far end of the crime scene and into the next room of the attic. The temporary lights set up around the crime scene were fainter here, cloaking the room in near-darkness.

Hayward and O’Connor moved to either side of the doorway. She gave a quick peek inside, ducked back, nodded to O’Connor, then proceeded.

Empty. More shelves had been thrown over, the glass littering the floor, filling the room with the choking stench of preservative. These jars seemed to have been filled with small rodents. A pile of papers had been dashed about and numerous stored objects flung helter-skelter. It reminded her, in a way, of the preliminary autopsy report on DeMeo: the killer had rooted about haphazardly among his internal organs, ripping and pulling stuff out with a kind of crazy, disorganized violence. A sick kind of vandalism.

She crept up to the next door, waited until the others were in position, ducked around for a visual. Another room, like the previous, completely trashed. One of the dingy skylights had been broken, but the bars above it were still intact. No escape that way.

She froze, suddenly listening. A faint sound was echoing back from the dark attics beyond.

“Hush!” she whispered. “Hear that?”

It was a strange kind of stumbling, limping gait: a dragging sound, followed by an unsettling thump: Draaag-thump. Draaag-thump.

Hayward moved into the next room, almost pitch-dark now. Pulling out her flashlight, she used it to illuminate the dark corners. The room contained thousands of plaster faces—death masks—staring

at them from every square foot of wall surface. Some of the masks showed signs of recent damage: someone, apparently the killer, had slashed at the masks, gouging out their eyes, leaving smears of blood everywhere.

The lights were off in the next room. Crouching beside the door frame of the next room, Hayward gestured for the men behind to stay put.

She leaned forward, listening intently. The strange sound had ceased: the killer was waiting, listening. She sensed, rather than knew, that he was near: very near.

She could feel the level of tension within their little group rising. Better to keep going: the less thinking the better.

Hayward ducked forward, swept the room with her flashlight, then ducked back again as quickly as she could. Something was crouching in the middle of the next room—naked, bestial, bloody... but definitely human, and surprisingly small and thin.

She gestured to the others, held one finger upward, then rotated it slowly toward the doorway: one perp, in the room beyond.

There was a tense moment as they gathered themselves. And then Hayward spoke in a firm, clear voice: "Police officers. Do not move. We're armed and we've got you covered. Walk to the doorway with your hands up."

She heard a scrambling noise, a thumping and banging like a beast shambling on all fours.

"He's running!"

Gun drawn, Hayward ducked around the corner just in time to see a dark figure scuttle into the darkness of the room beyond. This was followed by a tremendous crash.

"Let's go!"

She ran across the room to the far doorway, paused, gave a quick look into the next with the flashlight. There was no sign of the figure, but there were plenty of nooks and crannies where the killer could hide.

"Again!" They charged into the next room, immediately spreading

out and taking cover.

This was the largest attic room yet, filled with gray metal shelves tightly packed with jars. In each jar resided a single staring eye, the size of a cantaloupe, roots dangling like tentacles. One shelf of jars had been thrown to the ground, and the eyeballs lay ruptured, oozing jelly amid the glass and preservative.

A quick search disclosed the room was empty. Hayward gathered the team.

“Slowly but surely,” she said, “we’re driving him into a corner. Remember that people, like animals, get progressively more dangerous as they become cornered.”

Nods all around.

She glanced around. “The whale eyeball collection, it seems.”

A few nervous, steadying laughs.

“Okay. We’ll take it one room at a time. No hurry.”

Hayward moved to the edge of the next door, listened, then ducked her head around, flashed the light. Nothing.

As they moved into the room, Hayward heard a sudden, rending scream from beyond the far doorway, followed by the tremendous crash of glass and the sound of running liquid. The men jumped as if they’d been shot. A strong odor of ethyl alcohol drifted back.

“That stuff is flammable,” Hayward said. “If he’s got a match, get ready to run.”

She moved forward, raking the next room beyond with her flashlight.

“I see it!” O’Connor cried.

Draaag-thump! A shriek like a banshee, and then a dark figure, scuttling sideways but with horrifying single-mindedness, came rushing at them, gray flint knife raised in a fisted hand; Hayward jumped back as it crossed the threshold, knife slashing the air.

“Police!” she called out. “Drop your weapon!”

But the figure paid no heed, shambling crablike at them, knife

still slashing the air.

“Don’t shoot!” Hayward cried. “Mace him!”

She dodged the figure, drawing it around, while the other three cops flanked it on both sides, holstering their guns and pulling out their riot sticks and Mace. Visconti jumped forward and Maced the attacker and he howled like a demon, spinning and whipping the stone knife around blindly; Hayward deftly stepped in and gave a sharp, plunging kick to the inside of one leg, sending him sprawling. A second kick sent the knife skittering across the floor.

“Cuff him!”

But Visconti had already sprung into action, slapping the cuffs on one wrist and then, with the help of O’Connor, wrestling the other flailing arm down and cuffing it as well.

He screamed and bucked maniacally.

“Do his ankles!” Hayward ordered.

A minute later, the perp lay on his stomach, still pinned, writhing and shrieking in a voice so high it cut the air like a scalpel.

“Get the EMTs in here,” Hayward said. “We need a sedative.”

Most suspects, when cuffed hand and foot and pinned to the floor, settled down. Not this one. He continued to writhe and scream, twisting, rolling, thrashing about, and, small as he was, it was all that Hayward and the cops could do to hold him down.

“Must be on angel dust,” said one of the cops.

“I’ve never seen angel dust do this.”

A minute later, an EMT arrived and plunged a needle into the shrieking man’s buttock. A few moments later, he began to quiet down. Hayward got up and dusted herself off.

“Jesus,” said O’Connor. “Looks like he’s taken a shower in gore.”

“Yeah, and it’s gone off in this heat. He stinks.”

“Fucker’s naked, too.”

Hayward stepped back. The perp was still lying on his stomach,

face pressed to the floor by Visconti, whimpering and quivering in an unsuccessful attempt to fight off the sedative.

She bent down. “Where’s Lipper?” she asked him. “What did you do to him?”

More whimpering.

“Turn him over, I want to see his face.”

Visconti complied. The man’s face and hair were caked with dried blood and offal. He was grimacing strangely, his face seized by tics.

“Clean him up.”

The EMT broke out a pack of sterile gauze wipes and cleaned up his face.

“Oh, Christ,” Visconti said involuntarily.

Hayward merely stared. She could barely believe her eyes.

The killer was Jay Lipper.

Chapter 27

Spencer Coffey settled himself in a chair in Warden Imhof's office, impatiently flicking his trouser crease. Imhof sat behind his desk, looking much as he had during the first meeting: cool and neat, with the same blow-dried helmet of light brown hair on his head. Nevertheless, Coffey could see the uneasy, perhaps even defensive look in his eye. Special Agent Rabiner remained standing, arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

Coffey let a strained silence build in the office before speaking.

"Mr. Imhof," he began, "you promised you would take care of this personally."

"As I have," said Imhof in a coldly neutral voice.

Coffey leaned back. "S.A. Rabiner and I have just come from an interview with the prisoner. I'm sorry to say there's been no progress—none—in teaching him the value of respect. Now, I told you earlier I wasn't really interested in how you accomplished the task we set for you, that I was only interested in results. Whatever you're doing, it isn't working. The prisoner's the same cocky, arrogant bastard who first walked in here. Refused to answer questions. Insolent as well. When I asked him how he was enjoying solitary confinement, he said, 'I rather prefer it.'"

"Prefer it to what?"

"Being mixed in with 'former clients' is how he put it, the sarcastic bastard. Really emphasizing the point that he didn't want to be mixed with the general prison population. He's as unrepentant and combative as ever."

"Agent Coffey, sometimes these things take time."

"Which is exactly what we don't have, Mr. Imhof. We've got a second bail hearing coming up, and Pendergast's going to have a day in court. We can keep him from his lawyer only so long. I need him broken by then; I need a confession." What he didn't add were the growing problems they were having nailing down some of the evidence. That would make the bail hearing very tricky—whereas a

confession would make it all so nice and clean.

“As I said, it takes time.”

Coffey took a breath, remembering Imhof’s particular buttons. A little carrot, a little stick.

“Meanwhile, our man is down there bad-mouthing you and Herkmoor to all who will listen: guards, staff, everyone. And he’s an eloquent bastard, Imhof.”

The warden remained silent, but Coffey noticed—with satisfaction—a slight twitching at one corner of his mouth. And yet the man made no move to suggest stronger measures. Maybe there weren’t any stronger measures...

And that’s when the idea came to him—the masterstroke. It was the “former clients” phrase that did it. So Pendergast was afraid of being mixed up with “former clients”?

“Mr. Imhof,” he said—but quietly, as if to disguise the freshness of his brainstorm—“is that computer on your desk linked to the Department of Justice database?”

“Naturally.”

“Well, then. Let’s check up on some of these ‘former clients.’”

“I don’t understand.”

“Access Pendergast’s arrest records. Run them against your current prison population, see if you can find any matches.”

“You mean, see if any of the perps Pendergast arrested are currently in Herkmoor?”

“That’s the idea, yes.”

Coffey glanced over his shoulder at Rabiner. The agent had a wolfish smirk on his face.

“Boss, I like the way you think,” he said.

Imhof pulled the keyboard toward him and began typing. Then he stared at the screen for a long moment while Coffey waited in growing impatience.

“Strange,” Imhof said. “Pendergast’s collars seem to have suffered a rather high mortality rate. Most never made it to trial.”

“Surely, there have to be some live ones who made it through the legal system and ended up in prison.”

More typing. Then Imhof leaned back from the monitor. “There are two currently residing in Herkmoor.”

Coffey looked at him sharply. “Tell me about them.”

“One is named Albert Chichester.”

“Go on.”

“He’s a serial killer.”

Coffey rubbed his hands together, glanced again at Rabiner.

“Poisoned twelve people in the nursing home where he was employed,” Imhof went on. “Male nurse. Seventy-three years old.”

As quickly as it had come, Coffey’s exhilaration fell away. “Oh,” he said.

There was a brief silence.

“What about the other one?” S.A. Rabiner asked.

“A serious felon named Carlos Lacarra. They call him El Pocho.”

“Lacarra,” Coffey repeated.

Imhof nodded. “Former drug kingpin. Real hard case. Worked his way up through East L.A. street gangs and then came east. Took over much of the Hudson County and Newark enforcement action.”

“Yeah?”

“Tortured a whole family to death, including three kids. Revenge for a deal gone bad. Says here Pendergast was the S.A. in charge on that one—funny, I didn’t remember that.”

“What’s Lacarra’s record here?”

“Leads a gang in here known as the Broken Teeth. A major pain in the rear for our guards.”

“The Broken Teeth,” Coffey murmured. The exhilaration was quickly returning. “Now, tell me, Mr. Imhof. Where does this Pocho Lacarra currently enjoy his exercise privileges?”

“Yard 4.”

“And what would happen if you transferred Agent Pendergast to, ah, yard 4 for his daily exercise period?”

Imhof frowned. “If Lacarra recognized him, it would be ugly. Or even if he didn’t.”

“How so?”

“Lacarra... Well, there isn’t a delicate way of putting it: he likes a white boy for his bitch.”

Coffey thought for a moment. “I see. Please give the order at once.”

Imhof’s frown deepened. “Agent Coffey, that’s a rather extreme step—”

“I’m afraid our man has left us with no choice. I’ve seen hard cases in my time, I’ve seen sullen impudence before, but nothing like this. The way he disrespects the legal process, this prison—and you, in particular—is shocking. It really is.”

Imhof drew in a breath. Coffey noticed, with satisfaction, that the man’s nostrils flared briefly.

“Stick him in there, Imhof,” Coffey said quietly. “Stick him in there, but keep an eye on the situation. Extract him if things get out of hand. But don’t extract him too soon, if you get my meaning.”

“If something does happen, there could be fallout. I’ll need you to back me up.”

“You can count on me, Imhof. I’m behind you, in all the way.” And with that, Coffey turned, nodded to the still-grinning Rabiner, and left the office.

Chapter 28

Captain of Homicide Laura Hayward sat at her desk, gazing at the storm of paperwork in front of her. She hated disorder; she hated mess; she hated unsquared papers and shabby piles. And yet it seemed no matter how much she sorted and squared and organized, it ended up this way: the desk a physical manifestation of the disorder and frustration within her own mind. By rights, she should be typing up a report on the murder of DeMeo. Yet she felt paralyzed. It was damned hard to work on open cases when you felt you'd royally screwed up on a previous one; that maybe an innocent—or mostly innocent—man was in prison, unjustly charged with a crime that carried a potential death sentence...

She made another enormous effort to impose order on her mind. She had always organized her thoughts in lists: she was forever making lists nested within lists within lists. And she was finding it difficult to move forward with her other cases while the Pendergast case remained unresolved in her mind.

She sighed, focused, and began again.

One: a possibly innocent man was in prison, charged with a capital crime.

Two: his brother, long thought dead, had resurfaced, kidnapped a woman with apparently no connection to anything, stolen the world's most valuable diamond collection... and then destroyed it. Why?

Three—

A knock on the door interrupted her.

Hayward had asked her secretary to make sure she was not disturbed, and she struggled with a momentary anger that shocked her with its intensity. She brought herself back under control and said coldly, "Come in."

The door opened slowly, tentatively—and there stood Vincent D'Agosta.

There was a brief moment of frozen stasis.

“Laura,” D’Agosta began. Then he fell silent.

She maintained an utter coolness even as she felt the color mounting in her face. For a moment, she could think of nothing to say except “Please sit down.”

She watched him enter the office and take a seat, crushing with ruthless efficiency the emotions that welled up inside her. He was surprisingly trim and reasonably well dressed in a suit and a twenty-dollar sidewalk tie, his thinning hair combed back.

The moment of awkward silence lengthened.

“So... How’s everything?” D’Agosta asked.

“Fine. You?”

“My disciplinary trial is scheduled for early April.”

“Good.”

“Good? If they find me guilty, there goes my career, pension, benefits—everything.”

“I meant, it will be good to have it over with,” she said tersely. Is that what he’d come here to do—complain? She waited for him to get to the point.

“Look, Laura: first, I just want to tell you something.”

“Which is?”

She could see him struggling. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m really sorry. I know I hurt you, I know you think I treated you like dirt... I wish I knew how to make it up.”

Hayward waited.

“At the time, I thought, I really thought, I was doing the right thing. Trying to protect you, keep you safe from Diogenes. I thought that by moving out I could keep the heat off you. I just didn’t figure on how it would look to you... I was winging it. Things were happening fast and I didn’t have time to work everything out. But I’ve had plenty of time to think about it since. I know that I looked like a cold bastard, walking out on you with no explanation. It must have seemed like I didn’t trust you. But that wasn’t it at all.”

He hesitated, chewing his lip as if working up to something. “Listen,” he began again. “I really want us to get back together. I still care about you. I know we can work this out...”

His voice trailed off miserably. Hayward waited him out.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“Consider it said.”

Another excruciating silence.

“Is there anything else?” Hayward asked.

D’Agosta shifted uncomfortably. Slats of sunlight came in through the blinds, striping his suit.

“Well, I heard...”

“What did you hear?”

“That you were still looking into the Pendergast case.”

“Really?” she said coolly.

“Yeah. From a guy I know, works for Singleton.” He shifted again. “When I heard that, it gave me hope. Hope that maybe I could still help you. There are things that I didn’t tell you before, things that I felt sure you wouldn’t believe. But if you’re really still on the case, after all that’s happened... well, I thought maybe you should hear some of these things. To, you know, give you as much ammunition as possible.”

Hayward kept her face neutral, not willing to give him anything but a thunderous silence. He was looking older, a little drawn, but his clothes were new and his shirt was well ironed. She wondered, briefly and searingly, who was taking care of him. Finally she said, “The case is settled.”

“Officially, yeah. But this friend said that you were—”

“I don’t know what you heard, and I don’t give a damn. You should know better than to listen to departmental gossip from so-called friends.”

“But, Laura—”

“Refer to me as Captain Hayward, please.”

Another silence.

“Look, this whole thing—the killings, the diamond theft, the kidnapping—was all orchestrated by Diogenes. All of it. It was his master plan. He played everyone like a violin. He murdered those people, then framed Pendergast for it. He stole the diamonds, kidnapped Viola Maskelene—”

“You’ve told me all this before.”

“Yes, but here’s something you don’t know, something I never told you—”

Hayward felt a rush of anger that almost overwhelmed her icy control. “Lieutenant D’Agosta, I don’t appreciate hearing that you’ve continued to withhold information from me.”

“I didn’t mean it that—”

“I know exactly what you meant.”

“Listen, damn it. The reason Viola Maskelene was kidnapped is that she and Pendergast—well, they’re in love.”

“Oh, please.”

“I was there when they met on the island of Capraia last year. He interviewed her as part of the investigation into Bullard and the lost Stradivarius. When they met, I could see this connection between them. Diogenes somehow learned of it.”

“They’ve been seeing each other?”

“Not exactly. But Diogenes lured her here using Pendergast’s name.”

“Funny she never mentioned that during her debriefing.”

“She was trying to protect Pendergast and herself. If it got out that they had a thing for each other—”

“From one brief meeting on an island.”

D’Agosta nodded. “That’s right.”

“Agent Pendergast and Lady Maskelene. In love.”

“I can’t speak one hundred percent about the strength of Pendergast’s feelings. But as for Maskelene—yeah, I’m convinced.”

“And how did Diogenes discover this touching bit of sentiment?”

“There’s only one possibility: while Diogenes was nursing Pendergast back to health in Italy, after rescuing him from Count Fosco’s castle. Pendergast was delirious, he probably said something. So, you see? Diogenes kidnapped Viola to ensure that Pendergast was maximally distracted at precisely the moment he undertook the diamond heist.”

D’Agosta fell silent. Hayward took the time for a long breath and another effort at control.

“This,” she said quietly, “is a story straight out of a romance novel. This isn’t the way things happen in real life.”

“What happened with us wasn’t all that different.”

“What happened with us was a mistake I’m trying to forget.”

“Listen, please, Laura—”

“Call me Laura again and I’ll have you escorted out of the building.”

D’Agosta winced. “There’s something else you ought to know. Have you heard of the forensic profiling firm of Effective Engineering Solutions, down on Little West 12th Street, run by an Eli Glinn? I’ve been spending most of my time down there recently, moonlighting.”

“Never heard of it. And I know all the legitimate forensic profilers.”

“Well, they’re more of an engineering firm, and they’re pretty secretive, but they recently did a forensic profile of Diogenes. It backs up everything I’ve told you about him.”

“A forensic profile? At whose request?”

“Agent Pendergast’s.”

“That inspires confidence,” she said sarcastically.

“The profile indicated that Diogenes isn’t through.”

“Isn’t through?”

“All of what he’s done so far—the killings, the kidnapping, the diamond theft—has been leading up to something else. Something bigger, maybe much bigger.”

“Such as?”

“We don’t know.”

Hayward picked up some files and squared them on the desk with a crack. “That’s quite a story.”

D’Agosta began to get angry. “It’s not a story. Look, this is Vinnie you’re talking to, Laura. It’s me.”

“That’s it.” Hayward pressed an intercom button. “Fred? Please come to my office and escort Lieutenant D’Agosta off the premises.”

“Don’t do this, Laura...”

She turned to him, finally losing it. “Yes, I will do it. You lied to me. Played me for a fool. I was willing to offer you anything. Everything. And you—”

“And I am so very sorry. God, if only I could turn back the clock, do things differently. I tried my best, tried to balance my loyalty to Pendergast with my... loyalty to you. I know I screwed up a wonderful thing—and I believe that what we had is worth saving. I want your forgiveness.”

The door was opened by a police sergeant. “Lieutenant?” he said.

D’Agosta rose, turned, and exited without even a look back. The sergeant shut the door, leaving Hayward behind her heaped-up desk, silent and trembling, looking at the mess but seeing nothing, nothing at all.

Chapter 29

A dark, chill night had fallen over the restless streets of Upper Manhattan, but even on the brightest noon no sunlight ever penetrated the library of 891 Riverside Drive. Metal shutters were closed and fastened over mullioned windows, and drapes of rich brocade hid the shutters in their turn. The room was lit only by fire: the glow of candelabra, the flicker of embers dying on the wide grate.

Constance sat in a wing chair of burnished leather. She was very erect, as if at attention, or perhaps poised for flight. She was looking tensely at the other occupant of the room: Diogenes Pendergast, who sat on the couch across from her, a book of Russian poetry in his hands. He spoke softly, his voice as liquid as honey, the warm cadence of the Deep South strangely appropriate to the flow of the Russian. “,” he finished, then laid the book down and looked over at Constance. “‘Heart’s memory of sun grows fainter, fallow is the grass.’” He laughed quietly. “Akhmatova. No one else ever wrote about sorrow with the kind of astringent elegance she did.”

There was a short silence.

“I don’t read Russian,” Constance replied at last.

“A beautiful, poetic language, Constance. It’s a shame, because I sense hearing Akhmatova speak of her sorrow in her own tongue would help you bear your own.”

She frowned. “I bear no sorrow.”

Diogenes raised his eyebrows and laid the book aside. “Please, child,” he said quietly. “This is Diogenes. With others, you may put up a brave front. But with me, there’s no reason to hide anything. I know you. We are so very alike.”

“Alike?” Constance laughed bitterly. “You’re a criminal. And me—you know nothing about me.”

“I know a great deal, Constance,” he said, voice still quiet. “You are unique. Like me. We are alone. I know you’ve been blessed and cursed with a strange and terrible burden. How many would wish for such a gift as you were given by my great-uncle Antoine—and yet

how few could understand just what it would be like. Not liberation, not at all. So many, many years of childhood... and yet, to be deprived of being a child..."

He looked at her, the fire illuminating his strange, bicolored eyes. "I have told you. I, too, was denied a childhood—thanks to my brother and his obsessive hatred of me."

Immediately, a protest rose to Constance's lips. But this time she suppressed it. She could feel the white mouse shifting in her pocket, contentedly curling himself up for a nap. Unconsciously she moved a hand over the pocket, stroking it with slender fingers.

"But I've already spoken to you about those years. About my treatment at his hands." A glass of pastis sat at his right hand—he had helped himself from the sideboard earlier—and now he took a slow, thoughtful sip.

"Has my brother communicated with you?" he asked.

"How can he? You know where he is: you put him there."

"Others in similar situations find ways to get word to those they care about."

"Perhaps he doesn't want to cause me further discomfort." Her voice fell as she spoke. Her eyes dropped to her fingers, still absently stroking the sleeping mouse, then rose again to look at Diogenes's calm, handsome face.

"As I was saying," he went on after a pause, "there is much else we share."

Constance said nothing, stroking the mouse.

"And much that I can teach you."

Once again, she summoned a tart retort; once again, it remained unvoiced. "What could you possibly teach me?" she replied instead.

Diogenes broke into a gentle smile. "Your life—not to put too fine a term to it—is dull. Even stultifying. You're trapped in this dark house, a prisoner. Why? Aren't you a living woman? Shouldn't you be allowed to make your own decisions, to come and go as you please? Yet you've been forced to live in the past. And now, you live for others who only take care of you through guilt or shame. Wren, Proctor—

that busybody policeman D'Agosta. They're your jailers. They don't love you."

"Aloysius does."

A sad smile creased Diogenes's face. "You think my brother is capable of love? Tell me: has he ever told you he loved you?"

"He doesn't have to."

"What evidence do you have that he loves you?"

Constance wanted to answer, but she felt herself coloring in confusion. Diogenes waved a hand as if to imply his point was made.

"And yet you don't have to live this way. There's a huge, exciting world out there. I could show you how to turn your amazing erudition, your formidable talents, toward fulfilling, toward pleasing, yourself."

Hearing this, Constance felt her heart accelerate despite her best intentions. The hand stroking the mouse paused.

"You must live not only for the mind, but for the senses. You have a body as well as a spirit. Don't let that odious Wren jail you with his daily babysitting. Don't crush yourself any longer. Live. Travel. Love. Speak the languages you've learned. Experience the world directly, and not through the musty pages of a book. Live in color, not black and white."

Constance listened intently, feeling her confusion mount. The fact was, she felt she knew so little of the world—nothing, in fact. Her entire life had been a prelude... to what?

"Speaking of color, note the ceiling of this room. What color is it?"

Constance glanced up at the library ceiling. "Wedgwood blue."

"Was it always that color?"

"No. Aloysius had it repainted during—during the repairs."

"How long do you suppose it took him to pick that color?"

"Not long, I imagine. Interior decorating is not his forte."

Diogenes smiled. “Precisely. No doubt he made the decision with all the passion of an accountant selecting an itemization. Such an important decision, made so flippantly. But this is the room you spend most of your time in, isn’t it? Very revealing of his attitude toward you, don’t you think?”

“I don’t understand.”

Diogenes leaned forward. “Perhaps you will understand if I tell you how I choose color. In my house—my real house, the one that is important to me—I have a library like this. At first I thought of draping it in blue. And yet after some consideration and experimentation, I realized blue takes on an almost greenish tint in candlelight—which is the only light in that room after the sun has set. Further examination revealed that a dark blue, such as indigo or cobalt, appears black in such light. If pale blue, it fades to gray; if rich, like turquoise, it becomes heavy and cold. Clearly blue, though my first preference, would not work. The various pearl grays, my second choice, were also unacceptable: they lose their bluish gloss and are transformed into a dead, dusky white. Dark greens react like dark blues and turn almost black. So at length I settled on a light summery green: in shimmering candlelight, it gives the dreamy, languorous effect of being underwater.” He hesitated. “I live near the sea. I can sit in that room, all lights and candles extinguished, listening to the roar of the surf, and I become a pearl diver, within, and as one with, the lime-green waters of the Sargasso Sea. It is the most beautiful library in the world, Constance.”

He fell silent for a moment, as if in contemplation. Then he leaned forward and smiled. “And do you know what?”

“What?” she managed to say.

“You would love that library.”

Constance swallowed, unable to formulate a response.

He glanced at her. “The presents I brought you last time. The books, the other items... have you opened them?”

Constance nodded.

“Good. They will show you there are other universes out there—perfumed universes, full of wonder and delight, ready to be enjoyed. Monte Carlo. Venice. Paris. Vienna. Or, if you prefer: Katmandu, Cairo, Machu Picchu.” Diogenes waved his hand around the walls of

leather-bound books. "Look at the volumes you're surrounded by. Bunyan. Milton. Bacon. Virgil. Sober-sided moralists all. Can an orchid flower if you water it with quinine?" He stroked the copy of Akhmatova. "That is why I've been reading you poetry this evening: to help you see that these shadows you surround yourself with need not be merely monochrome."

He picked up another slender volume from the pile beside him. "Have you ever read Theodore Roethke?"

Constance shook her head.

"Ah! Then you are about to experience a most delicious, undiscovered pleasure." He opened the book, selected a page, and began.

I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss?—

Listening, Constance suddenly felt a strange feeling blossom deep within her: something faintly grasped at in fleeting dreams and yet still unknown, something rich and forbidden.

We sing together; we sing mouth to mouth...

She rose abruptly from the chair. The mouse in her frock pocket righted itself in surprise.

"It's later than I realized," she said in a trembling voice. "I think you had better leave."

Diogenes glanced at her mildly. Then he closed the book with perfect ease and rose.

"Yes, that would be best," he said. "The scolding Wren will be in shortly. It would not do for him to find me here—or your other jailers, D'Agosta and Proctor."

Constance felt herself flush, and immediately hated herself for it.

Diogenes nodded toward the couch. "I'll leave these other volumes for you, as well," he said. "Good night, dear Constance."

Then he stepped forward and—before she could react—inclined his head, took her hand, and raised it to his lips.

The gesture was executed with perfect formality and the best of breeding. Yet there was something in the way his lips lingered just out

of contact with her fingers—something in the warm breath on her skin—that made Constance curl inwardly with unease...

And then he was gone, suddenly, wordlessly, leaving the library empty and silent, save for the low crackle of the fire.

For a moment, she remained motionless, aware of her own quickened breathing. He had left nothing of himself behind, no trace of his scent, nothing—save for the small stack of books on the couch.

She came forward and picked up the top volume. It was exquisitely bound in silk, with gilt edging and hand-marbled endpapers. She turned it over in her hands, feeling the delicious suppleness of the material.

Then, quite suddenly, she placed it back on the pile, picked up the half-finished glass of pastis, and exited the library. Making her way into the back parts of the house, she entered the service kitchen, where she rinsed and dried the glass. Then she returned to the central stairway.

The old mansion was silent: Proctor was out, as he had been so frequently on recent nights, assisting Eli Glinn in his plans; D'Agosta had looked in earlier, but only to make sure the house was secure, and had left again almost immediately. And “scolding Wren” was, as always at this hour, at the New York Public Library. His tiresome self-imposed babysitting duties were, thankfully, confined to the daylight hours. There was no point in checking to see whether the front door was still locked—she knew it would be.

Now, slowly, she ascended the stairs to her suite of rooms on the third floor. Gently removing the white mouse from her pocket, she placed him in his cage. She slipped out of her frock and undergarments and folded them neatly. Normally, she would have gone through her evening ablutions next, donned a nightgown, and read in the chair beside her bed for an hour or so before retiring—at present, she was working her way through Johnson's Rambler essays.

But not tonight. Tonight, she drifted into her bathroom and filled the oversize marble bath with hot water. Then she turned to a beautifully papered gift box, resting on a brass server nearby. Inside the box were a dozen small glass bottles from a Parisian manufacturer of bath oils: a gift from Diogenes on his last visit. Selecting one, she poured the contents into the water. The heady scent of lavender and patchouli perfumed the air.

Constance walked over to the full-length mirror and regarded her nude form for a long moment, sliding her hands over her sides, along her smooth belly. Then, turning away, she slipped into the bath.

This had been Diogenes's fourth visit. Before, he had often spoken of his brother and made several allusions to a particular Event—Diogenes seemed to speak the word with a special emphasis—an Event of such horror that he could not bring himself to talk of it, except to say it had left him blind in one eye. He had also described how his brother had gone out of his way to poison others against him—herself in particular—by telling lies and insinuations, making him out to be evil incarnate. At first she had objected vehemently to that kind of talk. It was a perversion of the truth, she'd protested—teased out now for some twisted end of his own. But he had been so calm in the face of her anger, so reasonable and persuasive in his rebuttals, that despite herself, she had grown confused. It was true that Pendergast was remote and aloof at times, but that was just his way... wasn't it? And wasn't it true the reason he'd never contacted her from prison was to simply spare her additional anxiety? She loved him, silently, from afar—a love he never seemed to return or acknowledge.

It would have meant so much to have heard from him.

Could there be some truth to Diogenes's stories? Her head told her he was untrustworthy, a thief, perhaps a sadistic killer... but her heart told her differently. He seemed so understanding, so vulnerable. So kind. He had even shown her evidence—documents, old photographs—that seemed to undercut many of the things Aloysius had told her about him. But he hadn't denied everything; he had also accepted a share of blame, admitted to being a less-than-perfect brother—a deeply flawed human being.

Everything was so confused.

Constance had always trusted her head, her intellect—even though, in many ways, she knew her mind was fragile and capable of betraying her. And yet now it was her heart that spoke the loudest. She wondered if Diogenes was telling the truth when he said he understood her—because, at some deep level she had yet to plumb, she believed him: she felt a connection. Most important, she was beginning to understand him as well.

At last she rose from the bath, dried herself, and completed her preparations for bed. She chose to wear not one of her cotton nightgowns, but rather one of finely milled silk that lay, unworn and

half forgotten, at the bottom of a drawer. Then she slipped into bed, propped up her down pillows, and opened the collection of Rambler essays.

The words all ran together without meaning, and she grew restless. She flipped ahead to the next essay, scanned its stentorian opening, then closed the book. Getting out of bed again, she walked over to a heavy Duncan Phyfe armoire and opened it. Inside was a velvet-lined box containing a small collection of octavo books Diogenes had brought on his last visit. She carried the box back to bed and sorted through its contents. They were books she had heard about but never read, books that had never been a part of Enoch Leng's extensive library. The *Satyricon* of Petronius; Huysmans's *Àu rebours*; Oscar Wilde's letters to Lord Alfred Douglas; the love poetry of Sappho; Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Decadence, opulence, and passionate love clung to these pages like musk. Constance dipped into one and then another—at first gingerly, then curiously, then with something like hunger, reading late into the restless night.

Chapter 30

Gerry Fecteau found a sunny spot on the walkway overlooking yard 4 and snugged up the zipper of his guard's jacket. A late-winter light filtered down from a whiskey sky, not strong enough to melt the patches of dirty snow that still edged the yards and building corners. From where he stood, he had a good view of the yard. He glanced over at his partner, Doyle, placed strategically at the other corner.

The nature of their assignment had not been explained to them, not even hinted at. In fact, they had been given only one order: watch the yard from above. But Fecteau had been around long enough to read between the lines. The mystery prisoner, still in solitary, had been given yard privileges for good behavior—in yard 4. Obligatory yard privileges. With Pocho and his gang. Fecteau knew very well what was going to happen to the prisoner—who was about as white as a white man could get—when he was turned out in yard 4 with Lacarra and his thugs. And watching the yard from the walkway above, like he was doing, it would take a couple of minutes at least to get down to the yard if any trouble erupted.

There was only one reason for an order like that. The drummer hadn't worked—for some inexplicable reason, he'd actually grown quiet—and now they were on to something new.

He licked his lips and scanned the empty yard: the basketball hoop with no net, the parallel bars, the quarter acre of asphalt. Five minutes until the exercise hour. Fecteau wasn't exactly thrilled with the assignment. If anybody got killed, it would be his ass. And he sure didn't relish the thought of pulling Lacarra off someone. On the other hand, another part of him relished the thought of violence. His heart rate accelerated with anticipation and apprehension.

At the appointed time, to the second, he heard the bolts shoot back, and the double doors to the yard opened. Two guards stepped into the weak sunlight, hooked the doors open, and stood on either side while Pocho ambled out—always first—his eyes squinting around the cement yard, stroking the tuft of hair under his lip. He was wearing the standard prison jumpsuit, no coat despite the winter temperature. He turned as he walked, twisting the tuft of hair, muscles rippling under his sleeves. His shaved head gleamed dully in the weak light and across his face, making his old acne scars look like lunar

craters.

Lacarra sauntered into the center of the yard as the six other inmates filed out after him, heading off in different directions, striking casual poses as they looked around, chewing gum, walking aimlessly across the tarmac. One guard tossed out a basketball, which bounced toward one of the men; he flipped it up with his foot, caught it, then began bouncing it idly.

A moment later, the new prisoner stepped out, tall and straight. He paused just beyond the threshold, looking around, with a degree of casualness that made Fecteau tingle. The poor guy hadn't a clue.

Pocho and his boys didn't even seem to notice the newcomer—except that they all stopped chewing. But only for an instant. The ball continued its steady bounce, like the slow beating of a drum, bom... bom... bom. It was as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The mystery prisoner began to walk along the cinder-block wall of the yard. As he walked, he looked about, face neutral, his moves easy and smooth. The others followed him with their eyes.

The yard was enclosed on three sides by the cement walls of Herkmoor, with chain link topped by concertina wire forming the fourth barrier at the far end. The prisoner walked alongside the wall until he came to the chain link, then turned to follow the line of the fence, staring out through it as he walked. Prisoners, Fecteau had noticed, always looked out or up—never back in toward the grim building. A guard tower dominated the middle distance; and beyond that, the tops of the trees rose above the prison's outer wall.

One of the delivery guards looked up, caught Fecteau's eye, and shrugged as if to say, "What's going on?" Fecteau shrugged back and signaled them to leave, that the transfer of prisoners to the yard was good. The two disappeared back into the building, shutting the doors behind them.

Fecteau raised the radio to his lips and spoke in a low tone. "You reading me, Doyle?"

"I read you."

"You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yup."

“We better be ready to run down there and break things up.”

“Ten-four.”

They waited. The sound of the bouncing ball continued steadily. Nobody moved except the mystery prisoner, who continued his slow perambulation along the fence.

Bom... bom... bom, went the ball.

Doyle’s voice crackled over the radio again. “Hey, Gerry, this remind you of anything?”

“Like what?”

“You remember the opening scene of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*?”

“Yeah.”

“This is it.”

“Maybe. Except one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“The outcome.”

Doyle snickered over the radio. “Don’t worry. Pocho wants his meat alive, only tenderized.”

Now Lacarra removed his hands from his pockets, straightened up, and pimp-rolled over to a point on the fence thirty feet ahead of the prisoner. He hooked a hand on the chain link and watched the prisoner come toward him. Instead of varying his route to avoid Lacarra, the prisoner continued his leisurely stroll, not pausing for an instant, until he had come right up to Lacarra. And then he spoke to him. Fecteau strained to hear.

“Good afternoon,” said the prisoner.

Lacarra looked away. “Got a cigarette?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t smoke.”

Lacarra nodded, still looking off into the distance, his eyes half closed, like two black slits. He began stroking the tuft of hair, pulling

his lip down with each stroke, exposing a row of yellow, broken teeth.

“You don’t smoke,” Lacarra said quietly. “Isn’t that healthy.”

“I used to enjoy the occasional cigar, but I quit when a friend of mine developed cancer. They had to cut off most of his lower jaw, poor fellow.”

At this, Lacarra’s head swiveled toward him, as if in slow motion. “He must’ve been one ugly motherfucker after that.”

“It’s amazing what they can do with plastic surgery these days.”

Lacarra turned. “Hey, you hear that, Rafe? This boy’s got a friend with no mouth.”

As if on cue, Lacarra’s gang started to move again—all except the one with the ball. They began drifting in, like wolves.

“I think I’ll continue my walk now,” said the prisoner, moving to one side.

With a casual step, Lacarra moved to block the prisoner’s path.

The prisoner paused, and fixed a pair of silvery eyes on Lacarra. He said something in a low voice that Fecteau didn’t catch.

Lacarra didn’t move, didn’t look at the prisoner. After a moment he replied, “And what’s that?”

The prisoner spoke more clearly now. “I hope you’re not going to make the second worst mistake of your life.”

“What the fuck you talking about, second mistake? What’s the first mistake?”

“Murdering those three innocent children.”

There was an electric silence. Fecteau shifted, stunned by what he had heard. The prisoner had broken one of the most sacred rules of prison life—and what was more, had done it with Pocho Lacarra. And how in hell did he even know Lacarra? The man had been in solitary since he arrived. Fecteau tensed all over. Something terrible was going to happen—and it was going to happen soon.

Lacarra smiled, looking at him for the first time, showing more yellow teeth with a gap in the top, and then, through that gap, he

ejected a gobbet of phlegm which hit the toe of the prisoner's shoe with an audible smack. "Where'd you hear that?" he asked mildly.

"You tied them up first, though—big brave macho hombre that you are. Wouldn't want a seven-year-old girl to leave a scratch on that pretty face of yours. Eh, Pocho?"

Fecteau could hardly believe his ears. This guy had a death wish for sure. Lacarra's gang seemed equally stupefied, unsure how to respond, waiting for some kind of signal.

Pocho began to laugh: a slow, ugly laugh, full of menace. "Hey, Rafe," he called over his shoulder. "I don't think this motherfucker likes me, know what I mean?"

Rafe sauntered over. "Oh, yeah?"

The prisoner said nothing. Now the others were still drifting in, like a pack of wolves. Fecteau felt his heart pounding in his chest.

"You hurt my feelings, man," Pocho said to the prisoner.

"Indeed," came the reply. "And what feelings are those?"

Pocho stepped back and Rafe came in, all slow and nonchalant, and then—fast as a spring-loaded trap—he swung on the prisoner's gut.

The prisoner moved like a blur, one leg flashing out, and suddenly Rafe was doubled up, on the ground. Then, with a horrible sucking sound, he vomited.

"Knock it off!" Fecteau screamed down at them, raising his radio to call Doyle.

The others moved in fast while Pocho took another step away, letting the others do the dirty work. Watching, Fecteau was amazed, confounded, to see the prisoner move in a way he never thought possible, faster than he thought possible, some kind of martial art he wasn't familiar with—but of course, he was up against six gang members who had spent their entire lives street-fighting and nobody could hold up to that. As for the gang itself, they were so surprised by the prisoner's moves they had retreated, temporarily at bay. Another had fallen beside Rafe, stunned by a blow to the chin.

Fecteau turned and ran down the walkway, yelling into his radio

for backup. No way was he going to break this up with just Doyle.

Lacarra's voice rose up. "You gonna let this bitch kick your ass?"

The rest moved in and around. One lashed out and the prisoner spun, but it was a feint so another could move in while a third struck him in the gut—getting him good this time. And now they all moved in, fists flying, and the prisoner began to struggle beneath the blows.

Fecteau burst through the upper doors, no longer able to see the yard, ran down the stairs, unlocked another door, and dashed along the corridor. Doyle was just arriving, along with four other backup guards running from the station, riot sticks drawn. Fecteau unlocked the double doors to the yard and they jumped through.

"Hey! Cut the shit!" Fecteau screamed as they ran across the cement toward a small knot of Lacarra's men, hunched over an invisible figure on the ground, kicking the crap out of it. Two others now lay on the ground nearby, while Lacarra himself seemed to have disappeared.

"Enough!" Fecteau waded in with Doyle and the others, grabbing the collar of one thug and jerking him back, whacking another across the ear with his stick.

"Cut it! Enough!"

Doyle charged in beside him, Taser in hand, and the other guards waded in as well. In less than thirty seconds, the inmates had been restrained. The special prisoner lay on his back, unconscious, the blood covering his face a striking contrast to his skin, his pants nearly torn off at the waistband, his shirt split down the side.

One of the other prisoners was screaming hysterically somewhere in the background. "You seen what that crazy fucker do? You seen that, man?"

"What's happening, Fecteau?" came the warden's voice over the radio. "What's this about a fight?"

As if he didn't know. "The new prisoner got nailed, sir."

"What happened to him?"

"We need EMTs!" one of the other guards was calling in the background. "We got at least three prisoners hurt bad! EMTs!"

“Fecteau, are you there?” came Imhof’s strident voice.

“Yeah, the new prisoner’s hurt, don’t know how bad, though.”

“Find out!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Another thing: I want the EMTs on the new prisoner first. You understand?”

“Copy, sir.”

Fecteau looked around. Where the hell was Pocho?

Then he saw the form of Pocho huddled in a frozen corner of the yard, motionless.

“Oh, God,” he said. “Where are those EMTs? Get them here now!”

“Motherfucker!” came the hysterical voice. “You seen what he done?”

“Secure the others,” Fecteau cried. “Hear me? Cuff them and get them the hell out of here into lockdown!”

It was an unnecessary order. The gang members who could still stand were already being marched to the yard door. The shouting faded, leaving behind the high-pitched whimpering of one of the injured inmates. Lacarra lay in grotesque imitation of a supplicant, knees and face in the snow, head twisted in an unnatural angle. His motionlessness crept out Fecteau most of all.

The EMTs arrived, two of them, followed by two more wheeling stretchers.

Fecteau pointed to the special prisoner. “Warden wants him taken care of first.”

“What about that one?” The EMTs had fixed their horrified eyes on Lacarra.

“Take care of the new prisoner first.”

Even as they worked on the new prisoner, Fecteau couldn’t take his eyes off Lacarra. And then, as if in slow motion, Lacarra’s body began to move, began to topple on its side, where it lay, again

unmoving, the grinning face and wide-open eyes now turned to the sky.

Fecteau raised the radio to his lips, wondering just what to tell the warden. One thing was clear: Pocho Lacarra wasn't likely to be making anybody his bitch, ever again.

Chapter 31

On a cold March day, eastern Long Island did not much look like the playground of the rich and famous it was supposed to be. At least, that was Smithback's impression as he cruised past yet another muddy, stubble-strewn potato field, a bedraggled flock of crows wheeling about overhead.

Since his meeting with Hayward, Smithback had tried everything in his journalistic bag of tricks to find out more about Diogenes. He'd written suggestive articles, hinting at imminent breakthroughs and soliciting tips. He'd poked around the museum, asking questions and sifting rumors. Nothing. Pendergast remained in prison on charges of murder. Just as bad, Diogenes remained utterly vanished, free. The image of Pendergast's brother at large and no doubt hatching some fresh outrage both angered and frightened Smithback.

He wasn't sure, exactly, when the idea had come to him. But come it had... and now he was driving eastward on the island, heading for a house that he hoped—rather fervently hoped—was unoccupied.

Chances were, he'd find nothing. After all, what could he find that the police hadn't? But it was the only thing still left for him to do.

"In five hundred feet, turn right on Springs Road," spoke a mellifluous female voice from the dashboard.

"Thanks, Lavinia darling," Smithback said with a jauntiness he didn't feel.

"Turn right on Springs Road."

Smithback complied, swinging onto a cracked macadam road sandwiched between more potato fields, shuttered beach houses, and bare-limbed trees. Beyond lay a marsh of dead cattails and sawgrass. He passed a faded wooden sign in a picturesque state of dilapidation. Welcome to the Springs, it told him. This was an unpretentious corner of eastern Long Island, only faintly perfumed with the odor of quiet money.

"The town, my dear Lavinia, is small and unremarkable, but not

wholly without atmosphere,” said Smithback. “Wish you could see it.”

“In five hundred feet, turn right on Glover’s Box Road.”

“Very well.”

“Turn right on Glover’s Box Road,” came the smooth response.

“With a voice like that, you could make a fortune in the phone sex business, you know that?” Smithback was glad Lavinia was only a voice in his dashboard. The GPS navigation system couldn’t know just how nervous he felt.

He now found himself on a broad sandy spit of land, beach houses on either side among scraggly pines, cattail marshes, and scrub. A gray sheet of water lay to his left: Gardiners Bay. On his right was a bedraggled harbor, shut up for the winter, the yachts gone into tender.

“In three hundred feet, you will arrive at your destination.”

Smithback slowed. Ahead, he could see a sandy driveway leading through a sparse scattering of oaks to end at a gray, shingled house. Police sawhorses had been placed across the driveway, but there was no sign of a police presence. The house was shut up and dark.

The road curved past a few more houses, then ended in a loop where the spit came to an end. A sign to one side announced a public beach. Smithback pulled the car onto the side of the loop—he was the only one there—and stepped out, inhaling the fresh cold air. He zipped his jacket against the damp wind, shrugged his arms into a backpack, picked up a rock from the ground, placed it in his pocket, and strolled out onto the beach. The small waves slopped and hissed up the strand in a regular cadence. Strolling along, he picked up a few shells, tossed them back again, scuffed his sneakers along the sand, all the time making his way down the beach.

The houses stood just beyond the beginning of the sawgrass and dunes: gray shingles and white trim, silent and boarded up for the winter. The house he wanted was easy to identify: pieces of yellow crime scene tape still fluttered from stakes driven into the unkempt yard. It was a large house from the twenties, weather-beaten, with pitched roofs, a deep sea-facing porch, and two gables. Smithback continued past the house, but still there was no sign of any official presence. Still kicking sand nonchalantly, he strolled up through the dunes and sawgrass, hopped over a split rail fence, ducked under the

police tape, and scooted across the yard into the lee of the house.

He pressed himself against the wall, hidden from sight behind a half-dead yew, and slipped on a pair of leather gloves. The house would be locked, of course. He edged around until he came to a side door, then peered inside. He made out a tidy, old-fashioned kitchen, devoid of the usual utensils.

Smithback removed the rock from his pocket, along with a handkerchief. He wrapped the handkerchief around the rock, gave the window a smart rap.

Nothing happened. He struck harder, this time making a fairly audible thump, but still it did not break.

He took a closer look at the glass and noticed something unusual: it was thick and blue-green in color, and the light dividers were of painted metal, not wood.

Bulletproof glass?

Somehow, Smithback wasn't surprised. Diogenes would have retrofitted the house to be impregnable from the outside as well as escape-proof from the inside.

He paused, hoping he hadn't just wasted a three-hour drive. Certainly Diogenes would have thought of everything—how could he have forgotten that? There was no point in probing for weaknesses: there would be none.

On the other hand, the police might have left a door open.

Keeping hidden in the shrubbery, he crept around to the front porch. The door had crime scene tape stretched across it. He hopped onto the porch, glanced up and down the road, then turned to examine the door. This was how the cops had broken in—the door frame had been bent by crowbars and the door itself was bowed, the lock shattered. It appeared as if a remarkable amount of force had been necessary. Having destroyed the door lock, the police had affixed a padlock of their own, and this Smithback examined carefully. It was of case-hardened steel, too thick to cut with bolt cutters; but the fasteners had been screwed into fresh holes drilled in the metal door.

Smithback dipped into the leather backpack and pulled out a Phillips-head screwdriver. In five minutes, he had unscrewed one side. He pulled the fastener back and eased open the badly warped metal

door. In a moment, he was inside, the door shut behind him.

He paused for a moment, rubbing his hands together. It was warm in the house—the heat was still on. He was standing in a typical beach-house living room, with comfortable wicker furniture, braided and hooked rugs scattered about the floor, a gaming table set for chess, a grand piano in one corner, and a huge fireplace built from beach stones in the far wall. The light in the house was a curious green from the thick-glassed windows.

What was he looking for? He wasn't sure. Some clue to where Diogenes might be, perhaps, or under what other identity or identities he might be hiding. He had a moment's feeling of dismay, wondering how he could possibly find something that the police had missed or that—even more improbably—Diogenes himself had overlooked. Of course, the man had left in a hurry, leaving behind a slew of equipment and material, enough for the police to positively identify him as the museum diamond thief. Even so, he had proved himself to be not only exceptionally intelligent but also exceptionally careful. Diogenes wasn't the type to make mistakes.

Walking noiselessly, Smithback moved through an archway into a dining room beautifully paneled in oak, with a heavy table and Chippendale chairs. Paintings and prints hung on the dark red walls. A door in the far wall led to the tiny kitchen, also spotless. The police would not have cleaned the house: he figured this was the way Diogenes habitually kept it.

Back in the living room, Smithback wandered to the piano, hit a few keys. It was beautifully in tune, the hammers working smoothly.

Okay, that was one thing: Diogenes played the piano.

He looked at the music open on the stand: Schubert's *Impromptus*, opus 90. Under that, sheet music for Debussy's "Clair de Lune," a book of Chopin's nocturnes. A relatively accomplished pianist at that, but probably not at the concert level.

Next to the piano was another archway, leading into the library. This room was unaccountably disordered. Books lay on the floor, some open, with gaps on the shelves. The rug was rumpled and turned up at one end, and a table lamp lay broken on the floor. A large table dominated the middle of the space, covered with black velvet; above stood a row of bright spotlights.

In one corner, Smithback saw something that sent a shiver down

his spine: a large, finely machined, stainless-steel anvil. Next to it lay some rumpled rags and a strange kind of hammer made out of a gray, gleaming metal—titanium, perhaps?

Smithback backed out of the library, turned, and ascended the wooden stairs. At the top was a landing with a long hall, paintings of seascapes on both walls. A small, stuffed capuchin monkey crouched on a table, next to a glass dome under which stood a fake tree festooned with butterflies.

The doors to the rooms were all open.

Walking into the room directly at the top of the stairs, Smithback realized it must have been the one where Viola Maskelene was held prisoner. The bed was in disarray, there was a broken glass on the floor, and someone had scraped off the wallpaper on one wall, revealing metal underneath.

Metal. Smithback went over and carefully peeled off some more wallpaper. The walls were made of solid steel.

He shivered again, feeling a creeping sensation of alarm. The window was of the same thick blue-green glass as downstairs, and was barred. The door, which he examined next, was extremely heavy, also of steel, and it moved noiselessly on oversize hinges. He peered at the lock—superheavy machined brass and stainless steel.

Smithback's feeling of nervousness increased. What if Diogenes came back? But of course he wouldn't come back—that would be crazy. Unless there was something in the house he had forgotten...

He made a quick tour of the other bedrooms. On a hunch, he took his screwdriver and poked the wall of another room. It, too, was steel.

Did Diogenes plan to imprison more than one person? Or was the whole house fortified like this as a matter of course?

He skipped downstairs, heart pounding in his chest. The whole place was giving him the creeps. The day had proved a total waste: he'd come out there without a real plan, without looking for anything specific. He wondered if he should take notes—but of what? Maybe he should just forget it and go visit Margo Green. He was already out of the city. But that would be an equally useless journey—she had taken an abrupt turn for the worse, he understood, and was now comatose and unresponsive...

Suddenly he froze. Soft footsteps were moving across the porch.

With a sudden feeling of terror, he ducked into the coat closet at the bottom of the stairs. He pushed his way toward the back, nestling himself behind the row of cashmere, camel's-hair, and tweed coats. He could hear the rattle of the door, and then the groan as it slowly opened.

Diogenes?

The closet was thick with the smell of wool. He could hardly breathe from fear.

Footsteps moved quietly across the carpeted entry and into the living room, then stopped. Silence.

Smithback waited.

Next, the footsteps moved into the dining room, then faded away into the kitchen.

Should he run for it?

But even before he could consider, the steps returned: slow, soft, deliberate steps. Now they moved toward the library, back out, and up the stairs.

Now. Smithback flitted out of the closet, scurried across the living room, and dashed out the open door. As he rounded the corner of the porch, he saw that a cop car was standing in the driveway, engine running, door open.

He skipped through the backyard of the house next door and ran down onto the beach, almost laughing with relief. What he had assumed was Diogenes was only a cop, coming to check on the place.

He got back in his car and spent a moment recovering his breath. A wasted day. But at least he'd exited the house in one piece.

He started the car, turned on the navigator.

"Where would you like to go?" came the smooth, sexy voice. "Please enter the address."

Smithback punched up the menu and chose the "Office" option. He knew his way back, but he liked listening to Lavinia.

“We are going to the location called Office,” came the voice.
“Proceed north on Glover’s Box Road.”

“Righty-o, darling.”

He drove slowly and nonchalantly past the house. The cop was now outside, standing next to his cruiser with a mike in his hand. He watched Smithback drive by but made no move to stop him.

“In five hundred feet, turn left on Springs Road.”

Smithback nodded. He raised a hand to brush away a wisp of tweed wool from his face. As he did so, he stiffened with an almost electric shock.

“That’s it, Lavinia!” he cried. “The coats in the closet!”

“Turn left on Springs Road.”

“There were two kinds of coats! Super-expensive cashmere and mohair, and then a bunch of heavy, hairy, itchy tweed coats. Do you know of anyone who wears both? Hell, no!”

“Proceed for one mile on Springs Road.”

“Diogenes is the cashmere-and-mohair type, for sure. That means his alter ego wears tweeds. He’s disguised as a professorial type. It’s perfect, Lavinia, it feels right. He’s a professor. No, wait! Not a professor, not exactly. After all, he knows the museum so well... The police are saying the diamond heist had to have had inside help—but can you imagine Diogenes enlisting help? Hell, it’s staring us right in the face. Holy shit, Lavinia: we nailed it! I nailed it!”

“In five hundred feet, take a left on the Old Stone Highway,” came the placid response.

Chapter 32

What repelled Hayward most about the Bellevue psych ward wasn't the dingy, tiled corridors, or the locked steel doors, or the mingled smell of disinfectant, vomit, and excrement. It was the sounds. They came from everywhere—a cacophony of mutterings, shrill outbursts, monotonic repetitions, glottal explosions, whining, soft high-speed babblings: a symphony of misery, now and then punctuated by a cry so hideous, so full of despair, that it wrenched her heart.

Meanwhile, Dr. Goshar Singh walked beside her, speaking in a calm, rational voice as if he heard nothing—and maybe, she thought, he didn't. If he did, he would no longer be sane himself. It was that simple.

Hayward tried to focus on the doctor's words. "In all my years of clinical psychiatry," he was saying, "I've never seen anything quite like it. We're trying to get a handle on it. We've made some progress, although not yet as much as I'd like."

"It seems to have happened so suddenly."

"The sudden onset is a puzzling feature, indeed. Ah, yes, Captain Hayward: here we are."

Singh unlocked a door and held it open, ushering Hayward into an almost bare room, divided in half by a long counter, a thick plate-glass window above separating it from the other half—exactly like a visitors' room at a prison. An intercom was set into the glass.

"Dr. Singh," said Hayward, "I requested a face-to-face meeting."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Singh replied almost sadly.

"I'm afraid it will be possible. I can't question a suspect under these conditions."

Again, Singh shook his head sadly, his plump cheeks wagging. "No, no, we're in charge here, Captain. And I think when you see the patient, you'll realize that it wouldn't make a difference, no difference at all."

Captain Hayward said nothing. Now was not the time to fight with the doctors. She would evaluate the situation and, if necessary, return under her own conditions.

“If you would care to have a seat?” Singh asked solicitously.

Hayward seated herself at the counter and the doctor settled into the seat beside her. He glanced at his watch.

“The patient will be out in five minutes.”

“What kind of preliminary results do you have?”

“As I say, it is a most puzzling case. Most puzzling indeed.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“The preliminary EEG showed significant focal temporal abnormalities, and an MRI revealed a series of small lesions to the frontal cortex. It is these lesions that seem to have triggered severe cognitive defects and psychopathology.”

“Can you translate that into English?”

“The patient seems to have suffered severe damage to the part of the brain that controls behavior, emotions, and planning. The damage is most pronounced in an area of the brain we psychiatrists sometimes call the Higginbottom region.”

“Higginbottom?”

Singh smiled at what was evidently an inside psychiatric joke. “Eugenie Higginbottom worked on an assembly line in a ball-bearing factory in Linden, New Jersey. One day in 1913, there was a boiler explosion in the factory. Blew apart the stamper. It was as if a huge shotgun shell had gone off: ball bearings flew everywhere. Six people were killed. Eugenie Higginbottom miraculously survived: but with some two dozen ball bearings embedded in the frontal cortex of her brain.”

“Go on.”

“Well, the poor woman suffered a complete personality change. She was instantly transformed from a kind, gentle person to a foulmouthed slattern, given to outbursts of profanity and violence, a drunkard, and, ah, sexually promiscuous. Her friends were astounded.

It underscored the medical theory that personality is hardwired in the brain and that damage can literally transform one person into another. The ball bearings, you see, destroyed Higginbottom's ventromedial frontal cortex—the same area that is affected in our patient."

"But there are no ball bearings in this man's brain," Hayward said. "What could have caused it?"

"This is the crux of the matter. Initially, I hypothesized a drug overdose, but no drug residues were found in his system."

"A blow to the head? A fall?"

"No. No evidence of coup/contrecoup, no edema or bruising. We've also ruled out a stroke: the damage was simultaneous in several widely separated areas. The only possible explanation I can come up with is an electrical shock administered directly to the brain. If only we had a dead body—an autopsy would show so much more."

"Wouldn't a shock leave burn marks?"

"Not a low-voltage, high-amperage shock—such as one generated by electronic or computer equipment. But there's no damage anywhere but to the brain. It's hard to see how such a shock might have occurred, unless our patient was performing some kind of bizarre experiment on himself."

"The man was a computer technician installing an exhibit at the museum."

"So I've heard."

An intercom chimed, and a voice sounded softly. "Dr. Singh? The patient is arriving."

Beyond the glass window, a door opened, and a moment later Jay Lipper was wheeled in. He sat in a wheelchair, restrained. He was making slow circles with his head, and his lips were moving, but no sound came out.

His face was shocking. It was as if it had caved in, the skin gray and slack and hanging in leathery folds, the eyes jittery and unfocused, the tongue hanging out, as long and pink and wet as that of an overheated retriever.

"Oh my God..." Hayward said involuntarily.

“He’s heavily sedated, for his own safety. We’re still trying to adjust the meds, find the right combination.”

“Right.” Hayward looked at her notes. Then she leaned forward, pressed the talk switch on the intercom. “Jay Lipper?”

The head continued its slow orbit.

“Jay? Can you hear me?”

Was there a hesitation there? Hayward leaned forward, speaking softly into the intercom.

“Jay? My name is Laura Hayward. I’m here to help you. I’m your friend.”

More slow rolling.

“Can you tell me what happened at the museum, Jay?”

The rolling continued. A long gobbet of saliva, which had gathered on the tip of his tongue, dripped to the floor in a foamy thread.

Hayward leaned back and looked toward the doctor. “Have his parents been in?”

Singh bowed. “Yes, they were here. And a very painful scene it was.”

“Did he respond?”

“That was the only time he’s responded, and then only briefly. He emerged from his inner world for less than two seconds.”

“What did he say?”

““This isn’t me.””

““This isn’t me?’ Any idea what he meant by that?”

“Well... I imagine he retains some faint recollection of who he was, along with a vague realization of what he’s become.”

“And then?”

Singh seemed embarrassed. “He became suddenly violent. He said

he was going to kill them both and... rip out their guts. He had to be further sedated.”

Hayward glanced at him a moment longer. Then, thoughtfully, she turned back toward Lipper, still rolling his head, his glassy eyes a million miles away.

Chapter 33

He got into a fight with Carlos Lacarra,” Imhof told Special Agent Coffey as they strode down the long, echoing corridors of Herkmoor. “Lacarra’s friends weighed in, and by the time the guards broke it up, a certain amount of damage had been done.”

Coffey listened to the public recitation of events with Rabiner at his side. Two prison guards walking behind completed the entourage. They rounded a corner and continued down another long corridor.

“What kind of damage?”

“Lacarra’s dead,” said the warden. “Broken neck. Don’t know what happened, exactly—not yet. None of the prisoners are talking.”

Coffey nodded.

“Your prisoner got pretty banged up—mild concussion, contusions, bruised kidney, a couple of cracked ribs, and a shallow puncture wound.”

“Puncture wound?”

“Seems somebody shanked him. That was the only weapon recovered at the scene of the fight. All in all, he’s lucky to be alive.” Imhof coughed delicately and added, “He certainly didn’t look like a fighter.”

“And my man is back in his cell, as per my orders?”

“Yes. The doctor wasn’t happy.”

They cleared a security gate, and Imhof keyed an elevator for them. “At any rate,” he said, “I expect he’ll be a lot more amenable to questioning now.”

“You didn’t sedate him, did you?” Coffey asked as the elevator chimed open.

“We don’t habitually dispense sedatives here at Herkmoor—potential for abuse and all that.”

“Good. We don’t want to waste our time with a nodding vegetable.”

The elevator rose to the third floor, opening onto a pair of steel doors. Imhof swiped a card and punched in a code and they slid back, revealing a cinder-block corridor, painted stark white, with white doors on either side. Each door had a tiny square window and a foot slot.

“Herkmoor Solitary,” Imhof said. “He’s in cell 44. Normally, I’d escort him to a visiting room, but in this case he’s not exactly mobile.”

“I’d rather speak to him in his cell, anyway. With the guards on hand... in case he should become aggressive.”

“Not much chance of that.” Imhof leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I don’t want to tell you how to do your job, Agent Coffey, but I would imagine that any suggestion that he might be put back in yard 4 for exercise would get him talking a mile a minute.”

Coffey nodded.

They approached the cell door and one of the guards gave it several whacks with his riot stick. “Make yourself pretty, you got a visitor!”

Whang, whang! went the nightstick against the door. The guard removed his weapon and stood aside while the other unlocked the door and glanced in. “All clear,” he said.

The first guard holstered his weapon and stepped inside.

“How much time do you need?” Imhof asked.

“An hour should do it. I’ll have the guard call you when we’re done.”

Coffey waited until Imhof was gone, then he stepped into the small immaculate cell, followed by Rabiner. The second guard closed the door from the outside and locked it, preparing to stand watch.

The prisoner lay on the narrow bed, propped up on a thin pillow, dressed in a fresh jumpsuit so orange it almost glowed. Coffey was shocked by his appearance—head bandaged, one eye swollen shut and the other dark, the entire face a palette of black, blue, and green. Behind the puffy slit in the prisoner’s good eye, Coffey could see the

glitter of silver.

“Agent Coffey?” the guard asked. “Do you want a chair?”

“No, I’ll stand.” He turned to Rabiner. “Ready?”

Rabiner had removed a microcassette recorder. “Yes, sir.”

Coffey folded his arms and looked down at the battered and bandaged prisoner. He grinned. “What happened to you? Try to kiss the wrong guy?”

No answer, but then, Coffey expected none.

“Let’s get down to business.” He took out a sheet of paper with his notations. “Roll the tape. This is Special Agent Spencer Coffey, in prison cell number C3-44 at Herkmoor Federal Correctional and Holding Facility, interviewing the prisoner identified as A. X. L. Pendergast. The date is March 20.”

A silence.

“Can you talk?”

To Coffey’s surprise, the man said, “Yes.” His voice was barely a whisper and a little thick on account of his puffy lips.

Coffey smiled. This was a promising beginning. “I’d like to get this over with as soon as possible.”

“Likewise.”

It seemed the softening up had worked even better than he had anticipated.

“All right, then. I’m going to return to my previous line of questioning. This time I expect a response. As I’ve already explained, the evidence puts you in Decker’s house at the time of the killing. It provides means, motive, and opportunity, and a direct link between you and the murder weapon.”

The prisoner said nothing, so Coffey continued.

“Point one: the forensic team recovered half a dozen long black fibers at the crime scene, which we found came from a highly unusual cashmere/merino blended Italian fabric made in the 1950s. An analysis of the suits in your wardrobe indicate that all of them were

made from the same fabric, even the very same bolt of cloth.

“Point two: at the scene of the crime, we found three hairs, one with root. A PCR analysis proved it matched your DNA to a probability of error of one in sixteen billion.

“Point three: a witness, a neighbor of Decker’s, observed a pale-complected individual in a black suit entering Decker’s house ninety minutes before the murder. In no less than three photo lineups, he positively and categorically identified you as that person. As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, he is about as unimpeachable a witness as you could find.”

If the prisoner sneered momentarily, it happened so fast that Coffey wasn’t sure he had seen it at all. He took a moment to read the man’s face, but it was impossible to discern any kind of emotion in a face so swollen and bandage-covered. All he could really see of the man was the silver glitter behind the slitted eye. It made him uneasy.

“You’re an FBI agent. You know the ropes.” He shook the piece of paper at Pendergast. “You’re going to be convicted. If you want to avoid the needle, you’d better start cooperating, and cooperating now.”

He stood there, breathing hard, staring at the bandaged prisoner.

The prisoner gazed back. After a moment, he spoke.

“I congratulate you,” he said. His slurred voice sounded submissive, even obsequious.

“May I make a suggestion, Pendergast? Confess and throw yourself at the mercy of the court. It’s your only option—and you know it. Confess, and save us the shame of seeing one of our own dragged through a public trial. Confess, and we’ll get you transferred out of yard 4.”

Another brief silence.

“Would you consider a plea bargain?” Pendergast asked.

Coffey grinned, feeling a flush of triumph. “With evidence like this? Not a chance. Your only hope, Pendergast—and I repeat—is to store up a bit of goodwill with a nice, round confession. It’s now or never.”

Pendergast seemed to consider this for a moment. Then he stirred on the cot. “Very well,” he said.

Coffey broke into a smile.

“Spencer Coffey,” Pendergast went on, honeyed voice dripping with obsequiousness, “I have watched your progress in the Bureau for almost ten years, and I confess I’ve been amazed by it.”

He paused to breathe in.

“I knew from the beginning you were a special, even unique individual. You—what is the term?—nailed me.”

Coffey felt his smile broaden. This was good; this was the moment of humiliation against a hated rival that most people only dreamed about.

“Remarkable work, Spencer. May I call you Spencer? Peerless, I might even say.”

Coffey waited for the confession he was now certain was coming. The poor bastard thought flattering him would gain some sympathy. That’s what they all did: Oh, you’re so clever to have caught me. He gestured behind his back for Rabiner to move closer with the recorder, not to miss a word. The beauty of it was, Pendergast was only digging his own grave deeper. There would be no mercy, even with a confession: not for the man responsible for murdering a top FBI agent. A confession would shave ten years off his death-penalty appeals—that was all.

“I’ve been lucky enough to witness some of your work in person. For example, your performance during that harrowing night of the museum massacre many years ago, manning the mobile command station. That was truly unforgettable.”

Coffey felt a stirring of unease. He didn’t remember much from that awful night—to be truthful, it hadn’t been his best moment. But then, maybe he was just being too hard on himself, as usual.

“I remember that night vividly,” Pendergast went on. “You were in the thick of it, nerves of steel, barking orders.”

Coffey shifted. He wished the man would get on with the confession. This was getting a bit maudlin. Pathetic how quickly the man had been reduced to groveling.

“I felt bad about what happened afterward. You didn’t deserve that reassignment to Waco. It wasn’t fair. And then, when you mistook that teenager carrying home a prize catfish for a Branch Davidian terrorist with an RPG—well, that could have happened to anybody. Luckily, your first shot missed and your partner was able to tackle you before you squeezed off a second—although perhaps the teenager was in little danger, since I understand you came in dead last in your Firearms Training Unit at the Academy.”

The segue had happened so smoothly, Pendergast’s tone of voice never varying from its whining submissiveness, that it took Coffey a moment to realize the effusive praise had morphed into something else. The stifled snicker of the guard stung him to the quick.

“I happened upon a Bureau study of the Waco field office while it was under your benevolent leadership. It seems your office enjoyed being at the top of several lists. For example, the smallest number of cases successfully closed for three years running. The largest number of agents requesting transfers. The most internal investigations for incompetence or ethics violations. One could argue that your being transferred back to New York could not have come at a more convenient time. So nice to have an ex-U.S. senator for a father-in-law, Spencer, is it not?”

Coffey turned to Rabiner and said, as calmly as possible, “Turn it off.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pendergast didn’t pause, although his voice changed in tone to cool sarcasm. “How’s the PTSD treatment coming, by the way? I understand they’ve got a new approach that works wonders.”

Coffey gestured to the guard and said, with an effort at detachment, “I can see that further questioning of the prisoner is pointless. Open the door, please.”

Even as the guard outside fumbled with the door, Pendergast continued speaking.

“On another note, knowing your love of great literature, I recommend to you Shakespeare’s marvelous comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. Particularly the character of Constable Dogberry. You could learn much from him, Spencer. Much.”

The cell door opened. Coffey glanced at the two guards, their

expressions studiously neutral. Then, straightening his back, he proceeded down the corridor toward the solitary confinement security doors, Rabiner and the guards following in silence.

It took almost ten minutes of walking through endless corridors to reach Imhof's office, located in a sunny corner of the administrative building. By that time, some of the color had returned to Coffey's face.

"Wait outside," he told Rabiner, then marched stiffly past the obnoxious secretary, entered Imhof's office, and shut the door.

"How did it—?" Imhof began, but fell silent when he saw Coffey's face.

"Put him back in yard 4," Coffey said. "Tomorrow."

Surprise blossomed on the warden's face. "Agent Coffey, when I mentioned that earlier, it was suggested merely as a threat. If you put him back there, they'll kill him."

"Social conflicts among prisoners are their business, not ours. You assigned this prisoner to exercise in yard 4, and yard 4 is where he will stay. To move him now would be to let him win."

Imhof began to speak, but Coffey cut him off with a sharp gesture. "Listen to me well, Imhof. I'm giving you a direct, official demand. The prisoner stays in yard 4. The FBI will take full responsibility."

There was a silence.

"I'll need that in writing," said Imhof at last.

Coffey nodded. "Just tell me where to sign."

Chapter 34

Dr. Adrian Wicherly walked through the deserted Egyptian gallery, feeling a certain smug satisfaction at the special assignment Menzies had charged him with—him, and not Nora Kelly. He flushed at the thought of the way she had led him on and then humiliated him; he had heard that American women liked to burst one's bollocks, and now he'd had a taste of it, good and proper. The woman was as common as muck.

Well, he would be back in London soon enough, his C.V. nicely buffed up from this plum little assignment. His thoughts strayed to all the young, eager docents who volunteered at the British Museum—they had already proved to be delightfully flexible in their thinking. A pox on American women and their hypocritical puritanical moralism.

On top of that, Nora Kelly was bossy. Although he was the Egyptologist, she had never relinquished the riding crop; she had always remained firmly in charge. Although he had been hired to write the script for the sound-and-light extravaganza, she had insisted on proofreading it, making changes, and in general making a bloody nuisance of herself. What was she doing working in a big museum, anyway, when she really should be tucked away in some semidetached house in the suburbs with a pack of squalling brats? Who was this husband she was allegedly so loyal to? Maybe the problem was she was rogering someone on the side already. Yes, that was probably it...

Wicherly arrived at the annex and paused. It was very late—Menzies had been quite insistent on the time—and the museum was almost unnaturally silent. He listened to that silence. There were some sounds—but what, exactly, he couldn't say. A faint sighing somewhere of... what? Forced-air ducts? And then a slow, methodical ticking: tick... tick... tick... every two or three seconds, like a moribund clock. There were also faint thumps and groans, which could be ducts or something to do with the museum's mechanical systems.

Wicherly smoothed down his thatch of hair, glancing around nervously. They had caught the killer the day before and there was nothing to worry about. Nothing. Strange, though, what had happened to Lipper... typical smart-arsed New Yorker, one wouldn't have thought he would snap like that. Well, they were all a little tense.

These Americans worked themselves half to death—he couldn't believe the hours they worked. Back at the British Museum, such demands would be looked on as downright uncivilized, if not illegal. Look at him now, for example: three o'clock in the bloody morning. Of course, given the nature of Menzies's assignment, it was understandable.

Wicherly swiped his card through the reader attached to the wall, punched in his code, and the gleaming new stainless-steel doors to the Tomb of Senef opened with a whisper of well-machined metal. The tomb exhaled the scent of dry stone, epoxy glue, dust, and warm electronics. The lights came up automatically. Nothing had been left to chance; everything was now fully programmed. A backup tech to succeed poor Lipper had already reported for duty, but so far had proved superfluous. The grand opening was only five days away, and although the tomb's collections were only partially installed, the lighting, electronics, and the sound-and-light show were ready to go.

Still, Wicherly hesitated. His eye strayed down the long, sloping staircase to the corridor beyond. He felt a small tingle of apprehension. Trying to shake it off, he stepped inside and walked down the stairs, his oxfords making a chuff-chuff sound on the worn stones.

At the first door, he paused, almost against his will, glance arrested by the great Eye of Horus and the hieroglyphs below. To any who cross this threshold, may Ammut swallow his heart. It was a standard enough curse; he had entered a hundred tombs under a similar threat, and never once had it put the wind up him. But the image of Ammut on the far wall was unusually hideous. And then, there was the strange, dark history of the tomb, not to mention the business with Lipper...

The ancient Egyptians believed in the magical powers of the incantations and images written on tomb walls, especially in the Book of the Dead. These were not mere decoration: they had a power against which the living were helpless. In studying Egypt for so long, in learning to read hieroglyphics fluently, in immersing himself in their ancient beliefs, Wicherly had come to half believe them himself. Of course, they were all rubbish, but at one level he understood them so thoroughly they almost seemed real.

And never had they seemed more real than at that moment: especially the squatting, grotesque form of Ammut, its slavering crocodile jaws open and glistening, the scaly head morphing into a

leopard's spotted body, which in turn segued into the hindquarters of a hippo. Those hindquarters were the most vile of all: a bloated, slimy, misshapen fundament spreading over the ground. All three animals, Wicherly knew, were common killers of people during the time of the pharaohs, and greatly feared. A monstrous amalgamation of all three was the worst creature the ancient Egyptians could imagine.

Shaking his head and forcing a rueful chuckle, Wicherly walked on. He was letting himself get spooked by his own erudition, by all the ridiculous talk and silly rumors circulating through the museum. After all, this was not some tomb lost in the wastes of the Upper Nile: one of the biggest, most modern cities in the world was sitting right on top of him. Even as he stood there, he heard the distant, muffled rumble of a late-night subway. It annoyed him: despite all their efforts, they had been unable to block out totally the sound of the Central Park West subway.

He crossed the well and glanced up at the dense script from the Book of the Dead, his eye arrested by the odd inscription that he had so cavalierly dismissed during his first visit:

The place which is sealed. That which lieth down in the closed place is reborn by the Ba-soul which is in it; that which walketh in the closed space is dispossessed of the Ba-soul. By the Eye of Horus I am delivered or damned, O great god Osiris.

Like many inscriptions from the Book of the Dead, it was well-nigh opaque. But as he read it a second time, a glimmer of understanding came to him. The ancients believed people had five distinct souls. The Ba-soul was the ineffable power and personality each person possessed: this soul flew back and forth between the tomb and the underworld, and it was the means by which the deceased kept in touch with the underworld. But the Ba-soul had to reunite with the mummified corpse every night, or the deceased would die again: this time permanently.

The passage, it seemed to Wicherly, implied that those who invaded the place which was sealed—the tomb—would be deprived of their Ba-soul and thus damned by the Eye of Horus. In ancient Egypt, the insane were considered to be people who had somehow lost their Ba-soul. In other words, those who defiled the tomb would be driven insane.

Wicherly shivered. Isn't that just what had happened to that poor bugger Lipper?

Suddenly he found himself laughing out loud, his voice echoing unpleasantly in the close confines of the tomb. What was the matter with him? He was becoming as superstitious as a bloody Irishman. He gave his head another, more vigorous shake and proceeded into the inner tomb. He had work to do. He had a special errand to run for Dr. Menzies.

Chapter 35

Nora unlocked her office door, laid her laptop and mail on the desk, then shrugged out of her coat and hung it up. It was a cold, sunny late-March morning, and yellow light streamed in the window, making an almost horizontal bar of gold light, raking the spines of the books crowding the shelves along the opposite wall.

Four more days until the opening, she thought with satisfaction, and then she could get back to her potsherds—and her husband, Bill. Because of her long hours at the museum, their lovemaking had been so scarce of late he'd even stopped bothering to complain. Four more days. It had been a long, stressful haul—and bizarre even by museum standards—but it was almost over. And who knew? The opening might actually be fun. She'd be taking Bill, and she knew how much he liked a good gorge—and the museum, for all its shortcomings, knew how to throw a party.

She settled at her desk and had just begun slitting open the letters when a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," she said, wondering who else would be in so early—it was barely eight o'clock.

The avuncular form of Menzies appeared in the doorway, his blue eyes worried, his brow furrowed with concern.

"May I?" he asked, gesturing at the guest chair.

"Please."

He came in and sat down, folding one leg over the other and tugging at the crease in his herringbone slacks. "You haven't seen Adrian, have you?"

"No. But it's very early, he probably isn't in yet."

"That's just the thing. He did come in: at three this morning. Checked in through security and accessed the tomb, according to the electronic security logs. Then he left the tomb at three-thirty, locked it up tight. Strange thing is, he didn't leave the museum—he hasn't checked out. Security shows him as still on the premises, but he's not

in his office or lab. In fact, I can't find him anywhere. I thought perhaps he might have said something to you."

"No, nothing. Do you know why he came in at three?"

"He might have wanted to get a head start on the day: as you know, we have to start moving in the final artifacts at nine. I've got the carpenters, the Exhibition Department, and the conservation staff all mobilized. But no Adrian. I can't believe he would just vanish like this."

"He'll show up. He's always been reliable."

"I should hope so."

"I should hope so, too," came another voice.

Nora glanced up, startled. Wicherly stood in the doorway, looking at her.

Menzies seemed startled himself and then smiled with relief. "There you are! I was starting to get worried."

"No need to worry about me."

Menzies rose. "Well then, much ado about nothing. Adrian, I'd like to have a chat with you in my office about the artifact placements. We have a big day ahead of us."

"Mind if I have a word with Nora first? I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Fine." Menzies left and shut the door behind him.

Wicherly sat himself down, uninvited, in the wing chair Menzies had just vacated. Nora felt a twitch of annoyance. She hoped he wasn't going to repeat his asinine behavior of the previous week.

When he spoke again, his voice was laced with sarcasm. "Worrying that I might try to slip something unwelcome into your knickers?"

"Adrian, I don't have time for this. I've got a busy day ahead of me, and so do you. Give it a rest."

"Not after your abominable behavior."

“My behavior?” Nora took a breath: this was not the time to get into it. “The door is over there. Please use it.”

“Not until we settle this thing.”

Nora looked at Wicherly more closely, feeling a twinge of alarm. She was suddenly struck by how tired he looked—wiped out, even. His face was white; gray pouches had formed under his blue eyes; and his hair was damp and disordered. Most surprising of all, his suit and tie, always immaculate, looked untidy, even disheveled. Beads of sweat stood on his brow.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine!” But as he spoke, one side of his face suddenly contracted in a grotesque twitch.

“Adrian, I honestly think you need a break. You’ve been working too hard.” She kept her voice calm and cool. As soon as he left, she would call Menzies and suggest he order Wicherly home for the day. Much as they needed his expertise—and despite his obnoxious behavior, he’d proved invaluable—they couldn’t afford a crack-up just before the opening.

His face twitched again, a horrible muscular contraction that screwed his handsome features into a brief grimace before allowing them to spring back into normalcy.

“Why did you ask me that, Nora? Don’t I seem all right?”

His voice had risen in volume. She noticed his hands were gripping the arm of the chair so hard that the fingernails were digging into the fabric.

Nora rose from her seat. “You know, with all your hard work, I really think you’ve earned a day off.” She decided she wouldn’t even check with Menzies: she was the curator of the show, and she was going to send him home. Wicherly was in no condition to be supervising the moving of millions of dollars’ worth of artifacts.

Another hideous twitch. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“You’re exhausted, that’s all. I’m giving you the day off. This is not optional, Adrian. I want you to go home and get some rest.”

“Not optional? And since when have you been my boss?”

“Since the day you arrived here. Now, please go home or I’ll be forced to call security.”

“Security? They’re a ruddy joke!”

“Please remove yourself from my office.” And Nora reached for the phone.

But suddenly Wicherly—rising—lunged forward and swept it from the desk to the floor, stomped on the cradle, yanked the wire out the back, and tossed it aside.

Nora froze. Something terrible was happening to Wicherly, something utterly beyond her experience.

“Look, Adrian,” she said calmly. “Let’s just cool down here.” She stood up, then began edging along the desk.

“You bloody tart,” he said in a low, menacing tone.

Nora could see his fingers twitching now, contracting a little more with each twitch until they formed a spastically clutching fist. She could almost smell the air of violence gathering around him. She came around the desk, not fast, but with slow determination.

“I’m leaving,” she said as firmly as she could. At the same time, she braced for a fight. If he came at her, she’d go straight for his eyes.

“The fuck you are.” Wicherly stepped across her path while at the same time reaching behind his back and turning the lock in the door.

“Get away from me now!”

He stood his ground, eyes bloodshot, pupils like tiny black bullets. She struggled against a rising panic. What would work: calm persuasion or stern command? She could smell his sweat, almost as strong as urine. His face had screwed itself up again in a series of spastic jerks, his right fist clenching and unclenching. He looked exactly as if he’d been possessed by demonic forces.

“Adrian, everything’s okay,” she said, working a soothing note into her trembling voice. “You just need help. Let me call for a doctor.”

More twitching, his neck muscles knotting and bulging.

“I think you might be having a seizure of some kind,” she said. “Do you understand, Adrian? You need a doctor immediately. Please let me help you.”

He tried to say something but instead he spluttered, spittle drooling down his chin.

“Adrian, I’m going to step outside now and call you a doctor—”

His right hand jerked up like a shot, striking her hard across the face, but she had been tensing for just such an attack and she managed to sidestep the main force of the blow. She fell backward. “Somebody help me! Guards! Call the guards!”

“Shut up, bitch!” He shuffled forward, dragging one leg, and struck at her again, wildly. She stumbled against the side of her desk, off balance, and he leaped on top of her immediately, slamming her down and sending her laptop crashing to the floor.

“Help! I’m being attacked!”

She stabbed at his eyes with the rigid fingers of her hand, but he swatted her arm away and dealt her a blow across the side of her head, while his other hand grabbed the top of her blouse and ripped downward, scattering buttons.

She screamed again and tried to twist away from his grip, but his free hand came around and wrapped around her neck with shocking force, cutting off the sound. She scrabbled with her legs, trying to find a purchase, but he scissored them in his own.

“So, you think you’re the boss?” He raised his other hand and together they began squeezing her neck harder. She flailed, tore at his hair, pounded his back, but he seemed not even to notice, so fixated was he on the grip of his hands, his sweaty, stinking, twitching face shoved into hers.

“I’ll show you who’s boss around here.”

Nora punched and clawed helplessly, her diaphragm heaving to suck in air that wouldn’t come. Her larynx felt nearly crushed under the awful pressure. He’d blocked the blood flow to her brain and she felt the strength draining away like water from a burst hose; her eyes were suddenly flecked with a million exploding stars, and a spreading stain of darkness began clouding the edges of her vision like ink poured into water.

“How does it feel, bitch?”

She heard sounds in the background, as if from far away; a violent hammering and splintering of wood; and then, from the furthest edge of consciousness, she felt the iron grip of his hands loosen and fall away. She was still swimming in a sea of dimness when she was jolted by a burst of shouting and an incredibly loud bang.

She rolled over, coughing violently and holding her bruised neck... and suddenly Menzies was there, cradling her in his arms and calling for a doctor. She felt utter confusion. There seemed to be a terrific commotion beyond the desk, a knot of museum guards, shouting... and then she saw a river of blood spreading out across the floor. What had happened?

“I had to do it, he came at me with a knife!” came a desperate voice, edging into her returning consciousness.

“... just a letter opener, you idiot!”

“... a doctor! Now!”

“... tried to strangle her...”

The cacophony of loud, panicky voices continued, the shattered phrases sounding in her head as it all began to come back... She coughed, trying to block it all out, trying not to think, while Menzies eased her down into the wing chair, whispering all the time: “You’re all right, my dear, everything’s fine, the doctor’s on his way. No, don’t look over there... Close your eyes and all will be fine... Don’t look, don’t look...”

Chapter 36

Captain Hayward looked down at the huge puddle of blood on the linoleum floor of the office, all smeared about by the frantic and useless efforts of the EMTs trying to restart a heart that had been obliterated by a point-blank 9mm round fired from a Browning Hi. The scene was now being carefully examined, sorted, tagged, and bottled by the forensic teams and a variety of specialized crime scene investigators.

She backed out of the office, leaving it to the experts to make sense of what was clearly a senseless, tragic act. She had another assignment: to speak with the victim before she was taken to the hospital.

She found Nora Kelly waiting in the staff lounge, with her husband, Bill Smithback; the chairman of the Anthropology Department, Hugo Menzies; and several EMTs, police officers, and museum guards. The EMTs were arguing with Kelly about whether she would go to the hospital for a checkup and treatment.

"I want the guards and museum staff out," said Hayward. "Except Drs. Kelly and Menzies."

"I'm not going," said Smithback. "I'm not leaving my wife."

"You can stay, then," said Hayward.

One of the EMTs, who had obviously been arguing with Nora for a while, leaned in for one last try. "Listen here, miss, your neck is bruised and you might have a concussion. The effects can be delayed. We've got to take you in for tests."

"Don't 'miss' me. I'm a Ph.D."

"The paramedic's right," Smithback added. "You need to go for at least a quick exam."

"Quick? I'll be in the emergency room all day. You know what St. Luke's is like!"

"Nora, we can get along quite well without you today," Menzies said. "You've had a terrible shock—"

“With all due respect, Hugo, you know as well as I do that with Dr. Wicherly... Oh, God, this is terrible!” She choked up for a moment, and Hayward used the opportunity to speak.

“I know this is a bad time, Dr. Kelly, but can I ask you a few questions?”

Nora wiped her eyes. “Go ahead.”

“Can you tell me what happened leading up to the attack?”

Nora took a deep, steady breath. Then she proceeded to relate the events that had occurred in her office just ten minutes before, as well as the pass Wicherly had made at her a few days before. Hayward listened without interrupting, as did her husband, Smithback, his face darkening with anger.

“Bastard,” he muttered.

Nora waved an impatient hand at him. “Something happened to him today. He wasn’t the same person. It was like he had... a seizure of some kind.”

“Why were you in the museum so early?” Hayward asked.

“I had—have—a busy day ahead of me.”

“And Wicherly?”

“I understand he came in at three A.M.”

Hayward was surprised. “What for?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Did he go into the tomb?”

It was Menzies who answered. “Yes, he did. The security log shows he entered the tomb just after three, spent half an hour in there, then left. Where he was between then and the attack, we don’t know. I looked all over for him.”

“I assume you checked his background before you hired him. Did he have a criminal record, a history of aggression?”

Menzies shook his head. “Absolutely nothing like that.”

Hayward looked around and saw to her relief that Visconti had been assigned to the museum that day. She motioned him over.

“I want you to take statements from Dr. Menzies and the guard who shot Wicherly,” she said. “We can get Dr. Kelly’s when she returns from the hospital.”

“No way,” Nora said. “I’m ready to give a statement now.”

Hayward ignored her. “Where’s the M.E.?”

“Went to the hospital with the body.”

“Get him on the radio.”

A moment later, Visconti handed her a radio. Then he led Menzies off to take a statement.

“Doctor?” Hayward spoke into the radio. “I want an autopsy performed as soon as possible. I want you to look for lesions to the temporal lobe of the brain, particularly to the ventromedial frontal cortex... No, I’m not a neurosurgeon. I’ll explain later.”

She handed the radio back to Visconti, then cast a firm eye on Nora. “You’re going to the hospital. Now.” She gestured to the EMTs. “Help her to her feet and get moving.”

Then she turned to Smithback. “I want to talk to you privately, in the hall.”

“But I want to go with my wife—”

“We’ll have a police car take you after we speak, sirens, the works. You’ll get there at the same time as the ambulance.”

She exchanged a brief word with Nora, gave her a reassuring pat on her shoulder, and then nodded Smithback into the hall. They found a quiet corner and Hayward faced the journalist.

“We haven’t spoken in a while,” she said. “I was hoping you might have something to share with me.”

At the question, Smithback looked a little uncomfortable. “I published that story we talked about. Two, even. They didn’t shake free any leads—at least none that I heard about.”

Hayward nodded, waiting. Smithback glanced at her, then

glanced away. “Every trail I tried turned cold. That’s when I... paid a visit to the house.”

“House?”

“You know. His house. The one where he held Viola Maskelene.”

“You snuck in? I didn’t know they’d finished the investigation. When did the crime scene tape come down?”

Now Smithback looked even more uncomfortable. “It wasn’t down.”

“What?” Hayward raised her voice. “You trespassed on an active crime scene?”

“It wasn’t all that active!” Smithback said quickly. “I only saw one cop the whole time I was there!”

“Look, Mr. Smithback, I don’t want to hear any more. I can’t and won’t have you operating extralegally—”

“But it was in the house that I found it.”

Hayward stopped and looked at him.

“Well, it’s nothing I can prove. It’s just a theory, really. At first I really thought it was something, but later on... Anyway, that’s why I didn’t call you about it earlier.”

“Out with it.”

“In a coat closet, I found a bunch of Diogenes’s coats.”

Hayward crossed her arms, waiting.

“Three were very expensive cashmere or camel’s-hair, elegant, Italian-designed. Then there were a couple of big, bulky, itchy tweed jackets, also expensive but of a totally different style—you know, stodgy English professor.”

“And?”

“I know this sounds strange, but something about those tweeds—well, they almost seemed like a disguise. Almost as if Diogenes—”

“Has an alter ego,” Hayward said. She realized where this was

going, and she was suddenly very interested.

“Right. And what kind of alter ego would wear tweeds? A professor.”

“Or a curator,” Hayward said.

“Exactly. And then it dawned on me he’s probably a curator in the museum. I mean, they’re all saying the diamond heist had to have been an inside job. He didn’t have a partner—maybe he himself was the inside man. I know it sounds a little crazy...” His voice trailed off, uncertain.

Hayward looked at him intently. “Actually, I think it’s far from crazy.”

Smithback stopped to glance at her in surprise. “You do?”

“Absolutely. It fits the facts better than any other theory I’ve heard. Diogenes is a curator in this museum.”

“But it just doesn’t make sense. Why would Diogenes steal the diamonds... and then pound them into dust and mail them back here?”

“Maybe he has some personal grudge against the museum. We won’t know for sure until we catch him. Good job, Mr. Smithback. There’s just one more thing.”

Smithback’s gaze narrowed. “Let me guess.”

“That’s right. This conversation never took place. And until I say otherwise, these speculations are to go no further. Not even to your wife. And certainly not to the New York Times. Are we clear?”

Smithback sighed, nodded.

“Good. Now I need to track down Manetti. But first, let me get that squad car to take you to the hospital.” She smiled. “You’ve earned it.”

Chapter 37

In the great paneled office of Frederick Watson Collopy, director of the New York Museum of Natural History, a silence reigned. Everyone had arrived: Beryl Darling, the museum's general counsel; Josephine Rocco, head of PR; Hugo Menzies. The short list of Collopy's most trusted staff. They were all seated and looking in his direction, waiting for him to begin.

At last Collopy laid a hand on his leather-topped desk and looked around. "Never in its long history," he began, "has the museum faced a crisis of these proportions. Never."

He let that sink in. The silence, the immobility, of his audience held.

"In short order, we have been dealt several blows, any one of which could cripple an institution such as ours. The theft and destruction of the diamond collection. The murder of Theodore DeMeo. The inexplicable attack on Dr. Kelly, and the subsequent killing of the assailant—the very distinguished Dr. Adrian Wicherly of the British Museum—by a trigger-happy guard."

A pause.

"And in four days, one of the biggest openings in the museum's history is scheduled. The very opening that was to put the diamond theft behind us. The question I pose to you now is this: how do we respond? Do we postpone the opening? Do we hold a press conference? I've gotten calls from twenty trustees so far this morning, and every single one has a different idea. And in ten minutes, I have to face a homicide captain named Hayward who—I have no doubt—will demand that we postpone the opening. It's up to us four, at this moment, to set a course and stick with it."

He folded his hands on the desk. "Beryl? Your thoughts?"

Collopy knew that Beryl Darling, the museum's general counsel, would speak with brutal clarity.

Darling leaned forward, pencil poised in her hand. "The first thing I'd do, Frederick, is disarm every museum guard in the

building.”

“Already done.”

Darling nodded with satisfaction. “Next, instead of a press conference—which can spin out of control—I would immediately issue a statement.”

“Saying?”

“It will be an unvarnished recitation of the facts, followed by a mea culpa and an expression of profound sympathy to the families of the victims—DeMeo, Lipper, and Wicherly—”

“Excuse me. Lipper and Wicherly? Victims?”

“The expression of regret will be strictly neutral. The museum doesn’t want to get in the business of throwing stones. Let the police sort out the facts.”

A frosty silence.

“And the opening?” Collopy asked.

“Cancel it. Shut the museum down for two days. And make sure nobody—and I mean nobody—at the museum talks to the press.”

Collopy waited a moment, then turned to Josephine Rocco, head of public relations.

“Your comments?”

“I’m in agreement with Ms. Darling. We’ve got to show the public that it’s not business as usual.”

“Thank you.” Collopy turned to Menzies. “Do you have anything to add, Dr. Menzies?” He was amazed at how cool, collected, and composed Menzies looked. He wished he had the same sangfroid.

Menzies nodded toward Darling and Rocco. “I would like to commend Ms. Darling and Ms. Rocco for their well-considered comments, which under almost any other circumstances would be excellent advice.”

“But you differ?”

“I do. Most decidedly.” Menzies’s blue eyes, so full of calm self-

assurance, impressed Collopy.

“Let’s hear it, then.”

“I hesitate to contradict my colleagues, whose wisdom and experience in these matters exceeds my own.” Menzies glanced around humbly.

“I’ve asked for your unvarnished opinion.”

“Well, then. Six weeks ago, the diamond collection was stolen and destroyed. Now an outside contractor—not a museum employee—kills a co-worker. Then a museum consultant—a temporary hire, not an employee—assaults one of our top curators and is killed by a guard in the ensuing melee. Now, I ask you: what do these events have in common?” Menzies looked around inquiringly.

No one answered.

“Ms. Darling?” Menzies persisted.

“Well, nothing.”

“Exactly. During the same six-week period, New York City had sixty-one homicides, fifteen hundred assaults, and countless felonies and misdemeanors. Did the mayor shut down the city? No. What did he do instead? He announced the good news: the crime rate is down four percent from the previous year!”

“So,” drawled Darling, “what ‘good news’ would you announce, Dr. Menzies?”

“That despite recent events, the grand opening of the Tomb of Senef is still on schedule and will go off exactly as planned.”

“And just ignore the rest?”

“Of course not. By all means, issue a statement. But be sure to point out that this is New York City and that the museum is a vast place covering twenty-eight acres of Manhattan with two thousand employees and five million visitors a year, and that under these circumstances it’s surprising that more random crimes don’t happen. Be sure to emphasize the latter point: the crimes are not connected, they’re random, and they’ve all been solved. The perpetrators have been caught. A run of bad luck, that’s all.”

He paused. "And there's one final point to consider."

"What's that?" Collopy asked.

"The mayor is coming and plans to give an important speech. It's possible he might just use the auspicious occasion to announce his bid for re-election."

Menzies smiled and fell silent, his bright blue eyes surveying the room, challenging them all to respond.

The first to stir was Beryl Darling. She uncrossed her legs, tapped the pencil on the table. "I must say, Dr. Menzies, that's a rather interesting take on things."

"I don't like it," said Rocco. "We can't just dismiss all this, sweep it under the rug. We'll be crucified."

"Who suggested sweeping anything under the rug?" said Menzies. "On the contrary, we'll release all the facts. We'll hide nothing. We'll beat our breasts and take full responsibility. The facts work in our favor because they clearly demonstrate the random nature of the crimes. And the perpetrators are either dead or behind bars. Case closed."

"What about the rumors?" asked Rocco.

Menzies turned a pair of surprised blue eyes on her. "Rumors?"

"All the talk about the tomb being cursed."

Menzies chuckled. "The mummy's curse? It's marvelous. Now everyone will want to come."

Rocco's bright red lips tightened, cracking her heavy lipstick.

"And let's not forget the original purpose of the Tomb of Senef—to remind the city that we are still the greatest natural history museum in the world. We need this distraction more than ever."

A long silence settled on the group. Collopy finally stirred. "That's damned persuasive, Hugo."

"I find myself in the curious position of changing my mind," said Darling. "I believe I concur with Dr. Menzies."

Collopy looked at the PR head. "Josephine?"

“I still have my doubts,” she replied slowly. “But it’s worth a try.”

“Then that’s settled,” said Collopy.

As if on cue the door opened, with no knock, no announcement. A policewoman stood there, dressed in a smart gray suit, brass on her collar. Collopy glanced at his watch—she was on time to the second.

He rose. “May I introduce Captain of Homicide Laura Hayward. This is—”

“We’re all acquainted,” she said crisply. She turned a pair of violet eyes on him. She was disconcertingly young and attractive. Collopy wondered if she was some kind of affirmative-action type, advanced beyond her competence. Somehow, looking at those eyes, he doubted it.

“I’d like to speak with you privately, Dr. Collopy,” she said.

“Of course.”

The door closed after Menzies—the last to leave—had said his good-byes. Collopy turned his attention on Hayward. “Would you like to take a seat, Captain?”

After the briefest of hesitations, she nodded. “I think I will.” She sank down in a wing chair and Collopy noted that her skin was pale and she looked exhausted. And yet her violet eyes were anything but dull.

“What can I do for you, Captain?” he asked.

She withdrew a sheaf of folded papers from her pocket. “I’ve got here the results of the autopsy on Wicherly.”

Collopy raised his eyebrows. “Autopsy? Is there some mystery about how he died?”

By way of answer, she withdrew another piece of paper. “And here’s a diagnostic report on Lipper. The bottom line is they both suffered identical, sudden brain damage to the ventromedial cortex of the brain.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. In other words, they both went insane in exactly the same way. The damage produced a sudden, violent psychosis in each of

them.”

Collopy felt a cold sensation along the base of his spine. This was exactly what they had dismissed—that the incidents were somehow connected. This could ruin everything.

“The evidence suggests there’s some kind of environmental cause, and that it may be in or around the Tomb of Senef.”

“The tomb? Why do you say that?”

“Because that’s where both of them were immediately prior to the onset of symptoms.”

Collopy swallowed painfully, pulled at his collar. “This is astonishing news.”

“The M.E. thinks the cause could be anything: electrical shock to the head, poison, fumes or perhaps a malfunction in the ventilation system, an unknown virus or bacterium... We don’t know. This is, by the way, confidential information.”

“I’m glad of that.” Collopy felt the sensation of cold begin to spread. If this got out, it could put the lie to their statement and destroy all they had worked so hard for.

“Since I received this information two hours ago, I’ve put a special toxicological forensic team into the tomb. They’ve been at it for an hour and so far haven’t found anything. Of course, it’s early in their search.”

“This is very disturbing, Captain,” Collopy replied. “Is there any way the museum could be of assistance?”

“That’s exactly why I’m here. I want you to postpone the opening until we can locate the source.”

This was precisely what Collopy had been afraid of. He let a beat pass. “Captain, forgive me for saying so, but it seems you’ve jumped to two huge conclusions here: first, that the brain damage was caused by a toxin, and second, that this toxin is present in the tomb. It could have been anything—and happened anywhere.”

“Perhaps.”

“And you forget that others—many others—have spent

significantly more time in the Tomb of Senef than Lipper and Wicherly. They've manifested no symptoms."

"I didn't forget that, Dr. Collopy."

"In any case, the opening isn't for four days. Surely, that's enough time to check out the tomb."

"I'm not taking any chances."

Collopy took a long, deep breath. "I understand what you're saying, Captain, but the fact is, we simply can't delay the opening. We've invested millions. I've got a new Egyptologist arriving in less than an hour, flown in all the way from Italy. The invitations have been mailed and acceptances returned, the catering paid for, the musicians hired—everything's done. To back out now would cost a fortune. And it would send the wrong message to the city: that we're frightened, that we're stymied, that the museum is a dangerous place to visit. I can't allow that."

"There's something else. It's my belief that Diogenes Pendergast, the person who attacked Margo Green—and who stole the diamond collection—has a second identity as a museum employee. Most likely a curator."

Collopy looked at her, shocked. "What?"

"I also believe this person is somehow connected with what's happened to Lipper and Wicherly."

"These are very serious accusations. Who's your suspect?"

Hayward hesitated. "I don't have one. I asked Mr. Manetti to comb the personnel records—without telling him what I was looking for, of course—but no criminal histories or any other red flags came to light."

"Naturally not. Our employees all have spotless records, especially the curatorial staff. I find this whole line of speculation to be personally offensive. And it certainly doesn't change my position about the opening. A postponement would be fatal to the museum. Absolutely fatal."

Hayward looked at him a long time, her violet eyes weary yet alert. They seemed almost sad, as if she had already known the conclusion was foregone. "By not postponing, you risk putting many

lives in danger,” she said quietly. “I must insist on it.”

“Then we are at an impasse,” said Collopy simply.

Hayward rose. “This isn’t over.”

“Correct, Captain. A higher power than us will have to make the decision.”

She nodded and left the office without further comment. Collopy watched the door close behind her. He knew, and she knew, that it would boil down to a decision by the mayor himself. And in that case, Collopy knew exactly how the chips would fall.

The mayor wasn’t one to miss the opportunity for a good party and speech.

Chapter 38

Mrs. Doris Green paused at the open doorway to the intensive-care room. The afternoon light filtered through the partly screened windows, throwing peaceful stripes of light and shadow across her daughter's bed. Her eye moved across the bank of medical equipment, which sighed and beeped softly in a regular cadence, and came to rest on her daughter's face itself. It was pale and thin, a stray lock of hair running over the forehead and cheek. Mrs. Green took a few steps inside and gently moved the lock to its proper place.

"Hello, Margo," she said softly.

The machines continued to beep and sigh.

She eased herself down on the side of the bed and took her daughter's hand. It was cool and light as a feather. She gave it a gentle squeeze.

"It's a beautiful day outside. The sun's shining, and the cold weather seems to have broken. The crocuses are already coming up in my garden, just poking their little green shoots out of the ground. Do you remember when you were a little girl, just five years old—you couldn't resist picking them? You brought me a fistful of half-crushed flowers one day, cleaned out the whole garden. I was so upset at the time..."

Her voice faltered and she fell into silence. A moment later, the nurse entered, her cheerful, rustling presence adding a sudden efficiency to the gauzy atmosphere of bittersweet memory.

"How are you, Mrs. Green?" she asked, straightening up some flowers in a vase.

"All right, thank you, Jonetta."

The nurse checked the machines, jotting quick notes on a clipboard. She adjusted the IV, examined the breathing tube, then bustled about, plumping up more flowers and adjusting some of the get-well cards that covered the table and shelves.

"The doctor should be in at any moment, Mrs. Green," she said,

smiling and heading for the door.

“Thank you.”

Peace descended once more. Doris Green stroked her daughter’s hand ever so lightly. The memories came back, crowding in with no discernible order: diving with her daughter off the dock at the lake; opening the envelope containing her SAT scores; roasting Thanksgiving turkey; standing hand in hand beside her husband’s grave...

She swallowed, continued to stroke Margo’s hand. And then she felt a presence behind her.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Green.”

She turned. Dr. Winokur was standing there, a dark, handsome man in crisp white, exuding self-confidence and sympathy. Doris Green knew it wasn’t just his bedside manner: this doctor really cared.

“Would you care to talk in the waiting room?” he asked.

“I’d prefer to stay here. If Margo could hear—and who knows, maybe she can—she’d want to know everything.”

“Very well.” He paused, seated himself in the visitor’s chair, rested his hands on his knees. “The bottom line is this: we simply don’t have a diagnosis. We’ve performed every test we can think of and then some; we’ve consulted with the country’s top coma and neurology specialists, at Doctors’ Hospital in New York and Mount Auburn Hospital in Boston—and we just don’t have a handle on it yet. Margo is in a deep coma, and we don’t know why. The good news is that there’s no evidence of permanent brain damage. On the other hand, her vital signs are not improving, and some important ones are slowly declining. She simply isn’t responding to the normal treatments and therapies. I could load you down with a dozen theories we’ve had, a dozen treatments we’ve tried, but they all add up to one fact: she’s not responding. We could move her to Southern Westchester. But to tell you the truth, there isn’t anything down there that we don’t have here, and the move might not be good for her.”

“I’d prefer she stay here.”

Winokur nodded. “I have to say, Mrs. Green, you’ve been a wonderful patient’s mother. I know this is extremely hard on you.”

She shook her head slowly. "I thought I had lost her. I thought I'd buried her. After that, nothing could be worse. I know she's going to recover—I know it."

Dr. Winokur gave a small smile. "You could be right. Medicine doesn't have all the answers, especially in a case like this. Doctors are more fallible—and illness a great deal more complex—than most people realize. Margo is not alone. There are thousands like her all over the country, very ill and without a diagnosis. I'm not telling you this to comfort you so much as to give you all the information I have. I sense that is how you'd prefer it."

"It is." She glanced from the doctor to Margo and back again. "Funny, I'm not much of a religious person, but I find myself praying for her every day."

"The longer I'm a doctor, the more I believe in the healing power of prayer." He paused. "Do you have any questions? Is there anything I can do?"

She hesitated. "There is one thing. I got a call from Hugo Menzies. Do you know him?"

"Yes, of course—her employer at the museum. He was with her when she had her seizure?"

"That's right. He called me to tell me what had happened, what he'd seen—he knew I'd want to know."

"Of course."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"Yes, certainly. He's been very good—he's dropped in to check on Margo's condition more than once since her relapse. He seems most concerned."

Mrs. Green smiled faintly. "Having such a caring employer is a blessing."

"It most certainly is." The doctor rose.

"I'll just stay here a little while with her, Doctor, if you don't mind," Doris Green said.

Chapter 39

Thirty hours before the grand opening, the Tomb of Senef was boiling like a nest of angry hornets. And the swarm was no longer comprised of simply curators, electricians, carpenters, and technicians: a new element had been added to the mix. As Nora walked down the God's Second Passage toward the Hall of the Chariots, she was met with the glare of television lights and a knot of men setting up cameras and mikes at the far end of the hall.

"Over there, dear boy, over there!"

A slender man with clenched buttocks, wearing a camel's-hair sport jacket and yellow pinpoint bow tie, stood to one side. He was gesturing furiously with slender hands toward a burly soundman. Nora realized he must be the director Randall Loftus, whom Menzies had recently spoken to her about. He had won huge acclaim for his documentary series *The Last Cowboy on Earth*, and since then had produced a string of award-winning documentaries for public television.

As she approached, the babel of overlapping voices grew more shrill. "Testing. Testing..."

"Ugh! We've got the acoustics of a barn in here!"

Loftus and his crew were setting up to broadcast the premiere of the sound-and-light show on the night of the opening. The local PBS station planned to cover the opening live, and they had energetically syndicated the show to ensure it would not only go out to most PBS affiliates across the nation, but also be carried by the BBC and the CBC. It was a public relations coup that Menzies himself had worked hard to arrange. The resulting international attention, Nora knew, could go a long way toward saving the museum's bacon. But at the moment, they were causing utter chaos—and at the worst possible time. Their cables lay all over the ground, tripping up assistants carrying priceless Egyptian antiquities. The brilliant lights only added to the heat generated by hot electronics and the dozens of frantic people rushing about in a kind of controlled panic: the air-conditioning system ducts were roaring in a futile effort to lower the exhibit's temperature.

“I want two six-inch, one-kilowatt Mole Babies in the corner, there,” Loftus was saying. “Will somebody move that jar?”

Nora quickly stepped up. “Mr. Loftus?”

He turned to her, squinting over the tops of his John Mitchell glasses. “Yes?”

She gamely stuck out her hand. “I’m Dr. Nora Kelly, curator of the exhibition.”

“Oh! Of course. Randall Loftus. Delighted.” He began to turn away.

“Excuse me, Mr. Loftus? You mentioned something about moving a jar. I’m sure you’ll understand that nothing can be moved—or even touched—except by museum staff.”

“Nothing moved! How am I supposed to set up?”

“You’ll just have to work around things, I’m afraid.”

“Work around things! I’ve never been asked to perform in such conditions. This tomb is like a straitjacket. I can’t get any good angles or distance. It’s impossible!”

She gave him a brilliant smile. “I’m sure, with your talent, you’ll find a way to make it work.”

The smile had no effect, but at the word talent Loftus seemed to pause.

“I’ve admired your work,” Nora continued, sensing her opening. “I’m personally thrilled that you agreed to direct the show. And I know that, if anyone can make it work, you can.”

Loftus touched his bow tie. “Thank you indeed. Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“I wanted to introduce myself, see if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Loftus spun abruptly, shouted to someone in a dim corner teetering on a ladder, “Not that one, the other light, the LTM Pepper spot! I want it mounted on that ceiling rack on a three-sixty.”

He turned back to her. “You’re a dear, but we simply must move

that jar.”

“I’m sorry,” said Nora. “There’s no time to move anything even if we wanted to. That jar is three thousand years old and invaluable—you can’t just pick it up and move it. It takes special equipment, specially trained conservators... As I said, you’ll just have to work with what’s here. I’ll help you any way I can, but that’s one thing I can’t do. I’m sorry.”

Loftus drew in a long breath. “I can’t work around that jar. It’s so fat and horrible.”

When Nora didn’t reply, the director waved his hand. “I’ll talk to Menzies about it. Really, this is impossible.”

“I’m sure you’re as busy as I am, so I’ll leave you,” she replied. “As I said, if you need anything, let me know.”

He turned away instantly, zeroing in on another hapless production assistant laboring in the shadows. “The low crankovator goes where the tape is. On the floor. You’re standing on it! Look down, it’s between your legs, for heaven’s sake!”

Nora moved out of the Hall of the Chariots toward the burial chamber, leaving the gesticulating Loftus behind. The conservators had finished placing all the objects in the chamber—the last to be done—and Nora wanted to check the label copy against her master design. A knot of technicians was working on the fog machines inside the great stone sarcophagus. Earlier in the day, they’d run through a dress rehearsal of the entire sound-and-light show, and Nora had to admit that it was more than good. Wicherly may have been an ass, and possibly deranged, but he was also a brilliant Egyptologist and—what was more—an excellent writer. The script was an amazing tour de force; and the finale, when Senef came suddenly to life, rising out of a bubbling pool of mist, hadn’t seemed hokey at all. Wicherly had managed to slip quite a lot of good, solid information into the show. People would leave not just entertained, but educated.

She paused. It was strange how such a competent archaeologist could crack up so quickly. Unconsciously, she rubbed her throat, still raw and bruised. She still felt uncomfortable going back into her lab after what had happened. It was bizarre, tragic, inexplicable... But once again, she tried to push the attack from her mind. She would digest it all after the opening.

She felt a light tap on her shoulder.

“Dr. Kelly, I presume?” The voice was a dusky, cultured English contralto.

She turned to find herself face-to-face with a tall woman with long, glossy black hair, dressed in old canvas pants, sneakers, and a dusty work shirt. One of the workers, evidently, but one she hadn’t seen before: she would have remembered someone with such striking looks. And yet, as she looked at this stranger, she sensed she had seen her before.

“That’s me,” Nora said. “And you are—?”

“Viola Maskelene. I’m an Egyptologist and the new visiting curator for the show.” She stuck out her hand, seized Nora’s, and gave it a very vigorous shake. The grip was strong, the hand a little callused. This was someone who spent a lot of time outdoors—judging from her tan and her lean, one might even say weather-beaten, look.

“Very glad to meet you,” Nora said. “I hadn’t expected you so soon.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you,” Maskelene said. “Dr. Menzies has spoken so highly of you, and everyone just adores you! Dr. Menzies is tied up at present, but I wanted to come down and meet you right away... and see this marvelous exhibit!”

“As you can see, we’re down to the wire.”

“I’m sure you’ve got everything under control.” Maskelene looked around with relish. “I was so surprised to receive the museum’s invitation, and I can’t tell you how delighted I am to be here. XIX Dynasty tombs are my specialty. And, incredibly, the Tomb of Senef has never been studied or published, although it apparently contains one of the most complete texts to the Book of the Dead ever found. Very few scholars even knew it existed! I’d always thought it was mere rumor, an urban myth like the alligators in your sewers. This is an incredible opportunity.”

Nora smiled and nodded, studying the woman intently. The speed with which Wicherly had been replaced—he’d been dead only a few days—surprised her. But then, she reflected, the opening was looming and the museum absolutely had to have an Egyptologist in residence for the run of the show.

Viola, oblivious to the sound and chaos beyond, was looking around at the tomb with wonder. “What a treasure!”

Nora found herself liking the woman's high-spirited attitude. Her open, frank enthusiasm was infinitely preferable to the pontifications of some dusty old professor.

"I've just been checking the placement of the artifacts and doing a final run-through on the label copy," she said. "Care to come along? You might catch some errors."

"I'd adore it," she said, practically beaming. "Although with Adrian having done the work, I'm sure it's solid."

Nora turned. "You knew him?"

Viola's face clouded. "We Egyptologists are a rather small club. Dr. Menzies told me what happened. I can't understand it. How terribly frightening for you."

Nora simply nodded.

"I knew Adrian professionally," Viola said, her voice more quiet now. "He was a brilliant Egyptologist, although he rather fancied himself God's gift to women. Still, I never would have thought that... What a terrible shock." She broke off.

For a moment, an awkward silence settled over them. Then Nora roused herself.

"He left a fine legacy behind him," she said. "In his work for the exhibition. And I know it sounds crass, but the show must go on."

"I suppose so," Viola replied. Then she brightened a little. "I hear the sound-and-light show is quite spectacular."

"It has just about everything, even a talking mummy."

Viola laughed. "That sounds delicious!"

They walked on, Nora checking her clipboard. She took the opportunity to examine Viola Maskelene more closely out of the corner of her eye as the Egyptologist looked over the cases full of antiquities.

They paused at one spectacular canopic jar. "I'm afraid this is XVIII Dynasty," Viola said. "It's a bit anachronistic, compared to the other objects."

Nora smiled. "I know. We didn't quite have all the XIX Dynasty

objects we needed, so we expanded—fudged—the time period a bit. Adrian explained that antiques, even at the time of the pharaohs, were often put in burials.”

“Quite true! Sorry for bringing it up—I’m a bit of a stickler for details.”

“Being a stickler for details is exactly what we need.”

They circled the burial chamber, Nora checking items off her list, Viola parsing the label copy and examining the objects.

“Can you read hieroglyphics?” Nora asked.

Viola nodded.

“What do you make of the curse above the door, the one with the Eye of Horus?”

A laugh. “One of the nastiest I’ve ever seen.”

“Really? I thought they were all nasty.”

“On the contrary. Many Egyptian tombs aren’t even protected with curses. They didn’t need to be—everyone knew that to rob a pharaoh’s tomb was to steal from the gods themselves.”

“So why put a curse in this tomb?”

“I imagine it was because, unlike a pharaoh, Senef wasn’t a god. He may have felt that the additional protection of the curse might be warranted. That painting of Ammut... whew!” Viola shuddered. “Goya couldn’t do better.”

Nora glanced at the painting, nodding grimly.

“I understand word of this curse has gotten around,” Viola said.

“The guards started it. Now the whole museum is abuzz. A few of the maintenance staff flat-out refuse to go into the tomb after hours.”

They came around a pilaster, only to find a woman in a gray suit kneeling on the stone floor, scraping dust out of a crack and putting it in a test tube. Nearby, a man in a white lab coat was organizing what looked like samples in a portable chemical laboratory.

“What in the world is she doing?” Viola whispered.

Nora had never seen the woman before. She certainly didn't look much like a museum employee. In fact, she looked like a cop.

"Let's find out." Nora walked over. "Hello. I'm Nora Kelly, curator of the exhibition."

The woman rose. "I'm Susan Lombardi, with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration."

"May I ask what you're doing?"

"We're testing for any environmental hazards—toxins, microbes, that sort of thing."

"Really? And why is that necessary?"

She shrugged. "All I know is, the request came from the NYPD. A rush job."

"I see. Thank you."

Nora turned away and the woman went back to work.

"That's odd," said Viola. "Are they worried about some kind of infectious disease, perhaps, endemic to the tomb itself? Some Egyptian tombs have been known to harbor ancient viruses and fungus spores."

"I suppose so. Strange that no one told me."

But Viola had turned away. "Oh, look—what a fabulous unguent container! It's better than anything in the British Museum!" And she rushed over to a large glass case containing an artifact carved in white alabaster and decorated with paint, a lion crouching on the lid. "Why, it has the cartouche of Thutmosis himself on it!" She knelt, examining it with rapt attention.

There was something refreshingly spontaneous, even rebellious, about Viola Maskelene. Nora took in the woman's beaten-up canvas pants, lack of makeup, and dusty work shirt, wondering if this was going to be her standard museum uniform. She looked just the opposite of a stuffy British archaeologist.

Viola... Viola Maskelene. It was a strange name, and it rang a bell... Had Menzies mentioned her before? No, not Menzies... somebody else...

And then, quite suddenly, she remembered.

“You were the one kidnapped by the jewel thief!” It came out in a rush, before she’d had time to think, and Nora immediately colored.

Viola rose quietly from the case and brushed off her knees. “Yes. That was me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fling it out like that.”

“Actually, I’m glad you mentioned it. Better to get it out in the open and get past it.”

Nora felt her cheeks flaming.

“It’s fine, Nora—really. Actually, all that was just another reason I was glad to take this job and return to New York.”

“Really?”

“To me, it’s sort of like falling off a horse—you’ve got to get right back on if you ever hope to ride again.”

“That’s a good way to look at it.” Nora paused. “So you’re Agent Pendergast’s friend.”

Now it was time for Viola Maskelene to color. “You might say that.”

“My husband, Bill Smithback, and I are well acquainted with Special Agent Pendergast.”

Viola looked at her with fresh interest. “Really? How did you meet?”

“I helped with a case of his a few years ago. I feel terrible about what’s happened to him.” She didn’t mention her husband’s activities, which he had insisted on keeping confidential.

“Agent Pendergast is the other reason I returned,” Viola said in a low voice. Then she fell into silence.

After they had finished up in the burial chamber, they followed with a quick check of the side chambers. Then Nora glanced at her watch. “One o’clock. You want some lunch? We’re going to be here until after midnight, and you don’t want to be caught running on empty. Come on—the shrimp bisque in the staff cafeteria is actually worth making a trip for.”

At this, Viola Maskelene brightened. “Lead the way, Nora.”

Chapter 40

In the close darkness of cell 44, high within the isolation cellblock of Herkmoor Federal Correctional Facility, Special Agent Aloysius Pendergast lay at rest, his eyes open and staring at the ceiling. The dark was not absolute: an unchanging bar of light from the lone window streaked across the ceiling, formed by the harsh glare of the illuminated yards and grounds outside. From the next cell, the soft sounds of the drummer continued, muted and thoughtful now, a mournful adagio which Pendergast found curiously conducive to concentration.

Other sounds reached his sensitive ears: the clang of steel against steel; a distant gargled cry of anger; the endless repetition of a cough, coming in groups of three; footsteps of a guard on his rounds. The great prison of Herkmoor was resting but not sleeping—a world unto its own, with its own rules, food chain, rituals, and customs.

As Pendergast lay there, a trembling green dot appeared on the opposite wall: the beam of a laser, shot in through the window from a great distance. It quickly steadied itself. Then, after a moment, the dot began to blink off and on. Pendergast watched as it spelled out its coded message. The only sign of his comprehension was a slight quickening of breath toward the end of the message.

And then, as abruptly as it had come, the dot vanished. The faintly murmured word “Excellent” could be heard in the darkened cell.

Pendergast closed his eyes. Tomorrow at two o’clock he would once again have to face Lacarra’s gang, the Broken Teeth, in yard 4. And then—assuming he survived the encounter—an even greater task would follow.

Right now, he required sleep.

Employing a specialized and secretive form of meditation known as Chongg Ran, Pendergast identified and isolated the pain in his broken ribs; then he turned the pain off, one rib at a time. His consciousness moved to the torn rotator cuff in his shoulder, the puncture wound in his side, the dull ache of his cut and bruised face. One by one, with cold mental discipline, he isolated and extinguished

the pain in each part.

Such discipline was necessary. A most challenging day lay ahead.

Chapter 41

The ancient Beaux Arts mansion at 891 Riverside Drive boasted many spacious halls, but none were grander than the broad gallery that ran across the entire front portion of the second floor. The wall facing the street was composed of a series of floor-to-ceiling windows, sealed and shuttered. At each end of the hall, arched doorways led back to other parts of the mansion. Between the two doors, along the inside wall, stretched an unbroken succession of life-sized oil portraits. The gallery was lit by dim electric candelabra, which threw lambent light over the heavy gilt frames. Piano music sounded from hidden speakers: dense, lush, and demonically complex.

Constance Greene and Diogenes Pendergast walked slowly down the gallery, pausing at each portrait while Diogenes murmured the history of its subject. Constance wore a pale blue dress, set off by a black lace front whose buttons ran up to the low neckline that surrounded her throat. Diogenes wore dark trousers and a silver-gray cashmere jacket. Both held tulip-shaped cocktail glasses.

“And this,” Diogenes said as he stopped before a portrait of a splendidly dressed nobleman whose air of dignity was strangely offset by a rakish mustache, “is le Duc Gaspard de Mousqueton de Prendregast, the largest landholder in Dijon during the late sixteenth century. He was the last respectable member of the noble line which began with Sieur de Monts Prendregast, who won his title fighting in England with William the Conqueror. Gaspard was something of a tyrant: he was forced to flee Dijon when the peasants and villeins working his lands revolted. He took his family to the royal court, but a scandal ensued and they were forced to leave France. Exactly what next happened to the family remains something of a mystery, but there was a dreadful split. One branch moved to Venice, while the other—those left without favor, title, or money—fled to America.”

He moved to the next portrait, of a young man with flaxen hair, gray eyes, and a weak chin, whose full and sensual lips seemed almost the mirror of Diogenes’s own. “This is the scion of the Venice branch of the family, the duke’s son, Comte Lunéville—the title was by this point, alas, already honorary. He sank into idleness and dissipation, and for several generations his descendants followed suit. For a time, in fact, the lineage was sadly reduced. It did not regain its full flower

for another hundred years, when the two family lines were reunited by marriage in America... but even that, of course, proved a fleeting glory.”

“Why fleeting?” Constance asked.

Diogenes looked at her a moment. “The Pendergast family has been in a long, slow decline. My brother and I are the last. Although my brother married, his charming wife... met an untimely end before she could reproduce. I have neither wife nor child. If we die without issue, the Pendergast line will vanish from the earth.”

They proceeded to the next painting.

“The American branch of the family ended up in New Orleans,” he continued. “They moved comfortably in the wealthy circles of antebellum society. There, the last of the Venetian branch of the family, il Marchese Orazio Paladin Pendergast, married Eloise de Braquilanges in a wedding so lavish and brilliant it was talked about for generations. Their only child, however, became fascinated with the peoples, and the practices, of the surrounding bayous. He took the family in a wholly unexpected direction.” He gestured at the portrait, displaying a tall, goateed man in a brilliant white suit with a blue ascot. “Augustus Robespierre St. Cyr Pendergast. He was the first fruit of the reunited family lines, a doctor and a philosopher, who dropped an r from the last name to make it more American. He was the cream of old New Orleans society—until he married a ravishingly beautiful woman from the deep bayou who spoke no English and was given to strange nocturnal practices.” Diogenes paused a moment, as if reflecting on something. Then he chuckled.

“It’s remarkable,” Constance breathed, fascinated despite herself. “All these years I’ve stared at these faces, trying to put names and histories to them. A few of the most recent ones I could guess at, but the rest...” She shook her head.

“Great-Uncle Antoine never told you of his ancestry?”

“No. He never spoke of it.”

“I’m not surprised, really—he left the family on bad terms. As, in fact, did I.” Diogenes hesitated. “And it’s clear my brother never spoke much of the family to you, either.”

Constance took a sip from her glass in lieu of reply.

“I know a great deal about my family, Constance. I have taken pains to learn their secret histories.” He glanced at her again. “I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to be able to share this with you. I feel I can talk to you... like no other.”

She met his eyes only briefly before returning them to the portrait.

“You deserve to know it,” he continued. “Because after all, you’re a member of the family, too—in a way.”

Constance shook her head. “I’m only a ward,” she said.

“To me, you are more than that—much more.”

They had hesitated before the portrait of Augustus. Now, to break a silence that threatened to grow awkward, Diogenes said, “How do you like the cocktail?”

“Interesting. It has an initial bitterness that blossoms on the tongue into... well, something else entirely. I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

She looked at Diogenes for approval and he smiled. “Go on.”

She took another small sip. “I detect licorice and aniseed, eucalyptus, fennel perhaps—and notes of something else I can’t identify.” She lowered the glass. “What is it?”

Diogenes smiled, sipped from his own glass. “Absinthe. Hand-macerated and distilled, the finest available. I have it flown in from Paris for my personal consumption. Diluted slightly with sugar and water, as is the classic preparation. The flavor you can’t identify is thujone.”

Constance stared at the glass in surprise. “Absinthe? Made from wormwood? I thought it was illegal.”

“We should not be concerned with such trifles. It is powerful, mind-expanding: which is why great artists from Van Gogh to Monet to Hemingway made it their drink of choice.”

Constance took another, cautious sip.

“Look into it, Constance. Have you ever seen a drink of such a pure and unadulterated color? Hold it up to the light. It’s like gazing

at the moon through a flawless emerald.”

For a moment, she remained motionless, as if searching for answers in the green depths of the liqueur. Then she took another, slightly less tentative sip.

“How does it make you feel?”

“Warm. Light.”

They continued slowly down the gallery.

“I find it remarkable,” she said after a moment, “that Antoine fitted up this interior into a perfect replica of the family mansion in New Orleans. Down to the last detail—including these paintings.”

“He had them re-created by a famous artist of the day. He worked with the artist for five years, reconstructing the faces from memory and a few faded engravings and drawings.”

“And the rest of the house?”

“Almost identical to the original, save for his choice of volumes in the library. The use he devoted all the sub-basement chambers to, however, was... unique, to say the least. The New Orleans mansion was effectively below sea level and so had its basements lined with sheets of lead: that wasn’t necessary here.” He sipped his drink. “After my brother took over this house, a great many changes were made. It is no longer the place Uncle Antoine called home. But then, you know that all too well.”

Constance did not reply.

They reached the end of the gallery, where a long, backless settee awaited, cushioned in plush velvet. Nearby lay an elegant English game bag by John Chapman in which Diogenes had brought the bottle of absinthe. Now he lowered himself gracefully onto the settee and motioned for Constance to do the same.

She sat down beside him, placing the glass of absinthe on a nearby salver. “And the music?” she asked, nodding as if to indicate the shimmering piano scales that freighted the air.

“Ah, yes. That is Alkan, the forgotten musical genius of the nineteenth century. You will never hear a more luxuriant, cerebral, technically challenging artist—never. When his pieces were first

played—a rare event, by the way, since few pianists are up to the challenge—people thought them to be diabolically inspired. Even now Alkan’s music inspires strange behavior in listeners. Some think they smell smoke while listening; others find themselves trembling or growing faint. This piece is the Grande Sonate, ‘Les Quatre Âges.’ The Hamelin recording, of course: I’ve never heard more assured virtuosity or more commanding finger technique.” He paused, listening intently a moment. “This fugal passage, for instance: if you count the octave doublings, it has more parts than a pianist has fingers! I know you must appreciate it, Constance, as few do.”

“Antoine was never a great appreciator of music. I learned the violin entirely on my own.”

“So you can appreciate the intellectual and sensual heft of the music. Just listen to it! And thank God the greatest musical philosopher was a romantic, a decadent—not some smug Mozart with his puerile false cadences and predictable harmonies.”

Constance listened a moment in silence. “You seem to have worked rather hard to make this moment agreeable.”

Diogenes laughed lightly. “And why not? I can think of few pastimes more rewarding than to make you happy.”

“You seem to be the only one,” she said after a pause, in a very low voice.

The smile left Diogenes’s face. “Why do you say that?”

“Because of what I am.”

“You are a beautiful and brilliant young woman.”

“I’m a freak.”

Very quickly—yet with exceptional tenderness—Diogenes took her hands. “No, Constance,” he said softly and urgently. “Not at all. Not to me.”

She looked away. “You know my history.”

“Yes.”

“Then surely you, of all people, would understand. Knowing how I’ve lived—the way in which I’ve lived, here in this house, all these

years... don't you find it bizarre? Repugnant?" Suddenly she looked back at him, eyes blazing with strange fire. "I am an old woman, trapped in the body of a young woman. Who would ever want me?"

Diogenes drew closer. "You have acquired the gift of experience—without the awful cost of age. You are young and vibrant. It may feel a burden to you now, but it doesn't have to be. You can be free of it anytime you choose. You can begin to live whenever you want. Now, if you choose."

She looked away again.

"Constance, look at me. No one understands you—except me. You are a pearl beyond price. You have all the beauty and freshness of a woman of twenty-one, yet you have a mind refined by a lifetime... no, lifetimes... of intellectual hunger. But the intellect can take you only so far. You are like an unwatered seed. Lay your intellect aside and recognize your other hunger—your sensual hunger. The seed cries for water—and only then will it sprout, rise, and blossom."

Constance, refusing to look back, shook her head violently.

"You have been cloistered here—shut up like a nun. You've read thousands of books, thought deep thoughts. But you haven't lived. There is another world out there: a world of color and taste and touch. Constance, we will explore that world together. Can't you feel the deep connection between us? Let me bring that world here, to you. Open yourself to me, Constance: I am the one who can save you. Because I'm the only person who truly understands you. Just as I am the one person who shares your pain."

Now, abruptly, Constance tried to pull her hands away. They remained gently—but firmly—clasped in Diogenes's own. But in the brief struggle, her sleeve drew back from her wrist, exposing several slashing scars: scars that had healed imperfectly.

Seeing this secret revealed, Constance froze: unable to move, even to breathe.

Diogenes also seemed to go very still. And then he gently released one hand and held out his own arm, sliding up the cuff from his wrist. There lay a similar scar: older but unmistakable.

Staring at it, Constance drew in a sharp breath.

"You see now," he murmured, "how well we understand each

other? It is true—we are alike, so very alike. I understand you. And you, Constance—you understand me.”

Slowly, gently, he released her other hand. It fell limply to her side. Now, raising his hands to her shoulders, he turned her to face him. She did not resist. He raised a hand to her cheek, stroking it very lightly with the backs of his fingers. The fingers drifted softly over her lips, then down to her chin, which he grasped gently with his fingertips. Slowly, he brought her face closer to his. He kissed her once, ever so lightly, and then again, somewhat more urgently.

With a gasp that might have been relief or despair, Constance leaned into his embrace and allowed herself to be folded into his arms.

Adroitly Diogenes shifted his position on the settee and eased her down onto the velvet cushions. One of his pale hands strayed to the lacy front of her dress, undoing a row of pearl buttons below her throat, the slender fingers gliding down, gradually exposing the swelling curve of her breasts to the dim light. As he did so, he murmured some lines in Italian:

Ei's'immerge ne la notte,

Ei's'aderge in vèr' le stelle...

As his form moved over her, nimble as a ballet dancer, a second sigh escaped her lips and her eyes closed.

Diogenes's eyes did not close. They remained open and fixed upon her, wet with lust and triumph—

Two eyes: one hazel, one blue.

Chapter 42

Gerry sheathed his radio and cast a disbelieving look in Benjy's direction. "You won't frigging believe this."

"What now?"

"They're still bringing that special prisoner into yard 4 for the two o'clock exercise shift."

Benjy stared. "Bringing him back? You're shittin' me."

Gerry shook his head.

"It's murder. And they're doing it on our watch."

"Tell me about it."

"On whose orders?"

"Straight from the horse's ass: Imhof."

A silence gathered in the long empty hall of Herkmoor's building C.

"Well, two o'clock is in fifteen minutes," Benjy said at last. "We'd better get our butts in gear."

He led the way as they exited the cellblock into the weak sunlight of yard 4. A smell of springlike decay and dampness drifted on the air. The sodden grass of the outer yards was still matted and brown, and a few bare branches could be seen rising beyond the perimeter walls. They took up positions, not on the catwalk above this time, but in the actual yard.

"I'm not going to see my corrections career get flushed down the toilet," said Gerry darkly. "I swear, if any of Pocho's gang makes a move toward the guy, I'll use the Taser. I wish to hell they gave us guns."

They took up positions on either side of the yard, waiting for the prisoners in isolation to be escorted out for their lone hour of exercise. Gerry checked his Taser, his pepper spray, adjusted his side-handle

baton. He wouldn't wait to see what happened, like he'd done last time.

A few minutes later, the doors opened and the escort guards filed out with their prisoners, who sidled out into the yard, blinking in the bright light, looking as shit-stupid as they were.

The last prisoner to come out was the special one. He was as pale as a maggot and looked a mess: face bruised and bandaged, one eye nearly swollen shut. Despite being numbed by years of working in pens, Gerry felt a creeping sense of outrage that the man had been put back in the yard. Pocho was dead, true enough; but that had been an open-and-shut case of self-defense. This was different. This was cold-blooded murder. And if it didn't happen today, it would happen tomorrow or the next day, on their watch or someone else's. It was one thing to stick the guy in a cell next to the drummer, or put him in solitary, or take away his books, but this was out of line. Way out of line.

He braced himself. Pocho's boys were spreading out, doing their slow pimp-roll, hands in their pockets. The tall one, Rafael Borges, was bouncing the usual basketball, moving in a slow arc toward the hoop. Gerry glanced at Benjy and saw his partner was equally on edge. The escort guards made a gesture toward him and he gestured back, signifying the handoff was complete: they would take over the prisoners. The escort guards filed out, closing the double metal doors behind them.

Gerry kept his eye on the special prisoner. The man was strolling along the brick wall toward the chain-link fence, moving alertly but without undue alarm. Gerry wondered if he was all right in the head. If it were him out there, he'd have stained his shorts by now.

He watched as the special prisoner sidled over behind the basketball backboard and placed a casual hand on the chain-link fence, leaning against it. He looked up, then peered from side to side, almost as if waiting for something. The other prisoners slowly circled, none even looking in his direction, acting as if he didn't exist.

When a call came over his radio with a burst of static, Gerry jumped. "Fecteau here."

"This is Special Agent Spencer Coffey, FBI."

"Who?"

“Wake up, Fecteau, I don’t have all day. As I understand it, you and the other one, Doyle, are in yard 4 on exercise duty.”

“Yes, yes, sir,” Gerry stammered. Why the hell was Agent Coffey talking directly to him? It must be true what they were whispering, that the special prisoner was a fed—although he sure didn’t look like one.

“I want both of you up here in Main Security, on the double.”

“Yes, sir, as soon as we hand over yard duty—”

“I said, on the double. That means right now.”

“But, sir, there’s just the two of us guarding the yard—”

“I gave you a direct order, Fecteau. If I don’t see you in ninety seconds, I swear to God you’ll be in North Dakota tomorrow, on the midnight shift at Black Rock.”

“But you’re not—”

His reply was drowned out by a short blast of static as the FBI agent signed off. He looked over at Benjy, who had, of course, heard everything over his own radio. Benjy walked over, shrugging his shoulders faintly.

“We don’t report to that bastard,” Gerry said. “Do you think we have to do what he says?”

“You want to take that kind of chance? Let’s get going.”

Gerry replaced the radio, feeling sick to his stomach. It was murder, pure and simple. But at least they wouldn’t be there when it happened—and they couldn’t be blamed for that, now, could they?

Ninety seconds... He moved swiftly across the yard and opened the metal doors. Then he turned and threw one last glance back at the special prisoner. The man was still leaning against the chain-link fence behind the backboard. Pocho’s gang was already starting to close in, packlike.

“God help him,” he murmured to Benjy as the doors swung shut behind them with a deep metallic boom.

Chapter 43

Juggy” Ochoa sauntered across the asphalt of the yard, glancing at the sky, the fence, the basketball backboard, his brothers scattered about. His eye turned back to the metal doors that had just clanged shut. The two guards had split. Just like that. He could hardly believe they’d put “Albino” back in the yard—and left him there.

There the sucker was, leaning against the fence, coolly returning his gaze.

Ochoa glanced around again through slitted eyes. His prison instincts told him something was going on. It was some kind of setup. Ochoa knew the others felt the same way. They didn’t need to talk; everyone knew already what everyone else was thinking. The guards hated Albino as much as they did. Somebody in high places wanted him dead.

Ochoa was only too eager to oblige.

He spit on the asphalt and scuffed it in with his shoe while he watched Borges pound the basketball on the ground with his fist, once, twice, as he made a slow round toward the hoop. Borges was going to reach Albino first, and Ochoa knew Borges could be relied on to be cool and sit tight. There would be plenty of time to take care of the problem, nice and quiet, in a way that nobody got singled out. Sure, it would mean a few months in solitary, loss of privileges—but they were all lifers, anyway. And this was sanctioned. Whatever the consequences, they’d be mild.

He glanced up at the distant tower. Nobody was looking their way: the tower guards mostly looked to the side and out, toward the perimeter fences. Their view of the interior of yard 4 was limited.

He turned his gaze back to Albino, disconcerted to see the man was still staring at him. Let him stare. In five minutes, he’d be dead, ready to be rinsed off and shipped out.

Juggy glanced around at the hermanos. They, too, were taking it slow. Albino was a fighter, a motherfucking dirty fighter, but this time they’d be more careful. And he was banged up; he’d be slower. They’d take him down as a pack.

They continued to slide in, tightening the ring.

Borges had reached the three-point line. With a smoothly practiced motion, he tossed the ball up and it swished through the hoop, dropping down—into the waiting hands of the Albino, who had stepped forward with a sudden deft movement to catch it.

They all stood and stared at him, hard. He held the ball, returning their looks, his stitched-up face utterly neutral. Juggy felt a surge of rage at the raw challenge in his look.

He glanced over his shoulder. Still no guards.

Borges stepped forward and the Albino said something to him, talking in a rapid undertone, so low Juggy couldn't hear what he said. As he approached, Juggy reached down and pulled the little shank out of the crotch seam of his underwear. The time was now: shank the bastard and have it done.

"Hold on, man," said Borges, gesturing with his palm out as Ochoa stepped forward. "I want to hear this."

"Hear what?"

"You know you're being set up," Albino was saying. "They want you to kill me. And you know it—every single one of you. Do you know why?"

He stared in turn at the group that now encircled him.

"Who the fuck cares?" said Juggy, taking a step forward and readying the shank.

"Why?" said Borges, holding his arm out toward Juggy again.

"Because I know how to escape from here."

An electric silence.

"Bullshit," said Juggy, darting forward with the shank. But the Albino was ready and shot the ball at him, taking him by surprise, and in dodging it Juggy lost his stride. The ball bounced off and rolled away.

"Are you going to kill me and then spend the rest of your lives in here, never knowing if I was telling the truth?"

“He’s full of shit,” said Juggy. “He did Pocho, remember?” He lunged forward again, but the Albino skipped sideways and turned, like a matador. Borges grabbed Juggy’s arm with a grip of steel.

“He fucking did Pocho!”

“Let the man talk.”

“Freedom,” Albino continued, his drawling accent making the word sound delicious. “Have you been caged up so long you’ve forgotten what the word means?”

“Borges, nobody gets out of here,” Juggy said. “Let’s finish this.”

“Jug, don’t fucking do anything.”

Juggy looked around and saw that the others were staring at him. He felt incredulous: the Albino was sweet-talking his way out of a shank.

“Hear the man out,” said another gang member, Roany. The others nodded.

“This is the guy that waxed Pocho,” Juggy said again, feeling the conviction begin to drain out of his voice.

“So?” said Borges. “Maybe Pocho needed a little waxing.”

The Albino continued, speaking in a low voice. “Borges is going out first,” he said. “He believed me first. Jug, if you’re ready, you’re next.”

“Going out? When?” Borges asked.

“Right now, while the guards are gone.”

“The hell with this,” Juggy snarled.

“Okay, instead of Jug, I’ll take you.” And the Albino pointed to Roany. “Are you ready?”

“You know I am.”

“Wait a goddamn minute.” Ochoa took another lunge with the shank, but there was a sudden flashing movement that took him utterly by surprise, and when it was over, Albino held the shank.

Ochoa backed up. “You son of a bitch—”

“He’s just wasting our time,” said Albino. “Another word out of him and I’ll cut out his tongue. Any objections?” He looked around the group.

Nobody responded.

Ochoa stood there, breathing hard, saying nothing. The bastard had killed Pocho and taken over, just like that. How could it have happened so fast?

“Anyone who doubts me, look at this.” Albino reached over to the fence and grasped the links at a welded seam at a post, giving a sharp tug. The links parted effortlessly. He drew them back a bit more, stretching out an opening just large enough to admit a human being.

They stared in disbelief.

“Follow my instructions and you’ll all get out of here—even you, Mr. Jug. To prove my sincerity, I’ll go last. I’ve worked it out to the final detail. On the far side of the fence, you will scatter, each going out by a different route. Here’s the plan...”

Chapter 44

Pendergast waited until the last one, Jug, had climbed through the slit in the fence and disappeared, all of them tumbling through the gap so quickly they hardly cared whether he followed or not—which was precisely what Pendergast had hoped. They would each be following separate escape routes, exquisitely choreographed by Eli Glinn to create a maximal uproar and response.

After Jug had disappeared, Pendergast grasped the cut fence, which had sprung back into place, and pulled it as wide as he could, stretching and bending the metal to leave the gap obvious for the guards who would soon be coming. He stepped back and examined the digital watch on his wrist, which in Pendergast's case had far more sophisticated guts inside than its cheap plastic casing suggested. Those guts included a receiver unit that downloaded ACTS satellite time signals, which would be of the utmost importance for the impending operation. He waited until the precise appointed time, then pressed a button on the watch, activating a timer. The display began counting down from 900 seconds.

Pendergast stepped back and waited.

At 846 seconds, the sudden howl of emergency sirens filled the air. Pendergast turned and walked swiftly across the yard into the angle of the building closest to the door, where two shabby cement walls came together at a right angle. There, he reached down into a drainpipe and retrieved a long, thin tube: the same tube D'Agosta had placed inside it a few days earlier. He released the catches at both ends, unrolled it like a flag, and gave it a sharp shake. Immediately, it popped out into its intended shape: two equal squares of fabric about three feet per side, joined along one edge by plastic stays to create a V shape. The squares were coated in very thin sheets of brilliantly reflective Mylar. The entire construction, in fact, had been modified by Glinn from a standard portable light reflector such as those used in outdoor advertising shoots.

Now Pendergast moved into the corner, putting his back against the bricks and crouching low to the ground. He positioned the device in front, snugging it up close to him and making sure the outer two edges of the V-shaped reflector were tight against the walls on each side, forming a ninety-degree angle.

It was a simple but highly refined application of one of the oldest stage illusions of magic: using carefully angled mirrors to make someone vanish. It had been used as early as the 1860s, when Professor John Pepper's "Proteus Cabinet" and Colonel Stodare's "Sphinx" act—in which a woman was placed in a box that was subsequently shown to be empty—were the rage of Broadway. Pressed into the corner of the prison yard, the reflector accomplished the same effect: creating in essence a mirrored box that Pendergast could hide behind. Its mirrored surfaces reflected the cement walls on either side, creating the illusion of a vacant corner where the two walls came together. Only someone actually walking over to examine the corner would discover the deception—and the current panic was calculated to prevent that.

At 821, Pendergast heard the electronic bolts disengage; the doors were flung open, and four "first responder" guards from nearby guard station 7 charged into yard 4, Tasers at the ready.

"Fence is cut!" one cried, pointing to the gaping hole at the far end.

As the four sprinted across the asphalt toward the gap, Pendergast stood, snapped the two sides of the Mylar reflector together, rolled it back into a compact tube, and returned it to the drainpipe. Then he slipped through the doors into the prison, sprinting around a corner and into the nearby bathroom. Quickly, he entered the second-to-last stall, stood on the toilet, and lifted the acoustic ceiling tile overhead. There, taped to the upper side, he found a plastic bag containing a slim four-gigabyte flash-memory chip, a credit card, a small hypodermic needle and syringe, some duct tape, and a tiny capsule of brown liquid. Pocketing the items, he exited the bathroom and darted down the hall to guard station 7. Just as Glinn had predicted: of the five guards on duty, four had responded to the escape call, leaving the lone commanding guard at the console, surrounded by a wall of live video feeds. The man was shouting orders into a microphone and punching up feed after feed, frantically searching for the loose inmates. An overwhelming response had been mobilized to deal with the mass escape attempt. Based on the guard's excited chatter, already one of the inmates had been run down and recaptured.

As Glinn had anticipated, the door to guard station 7 had been left unlocked in the hasty departure of the first responders.

Pendergast slipped inside, then threw an arm around the guard's neck and injected him. The guard slumped without a word and

Pendergast laid him out on the floor, then half covered the guard's comm mike with his hand and yelled hoarsely into it, "I see one of them! I'm going after him!"

He quickly undressed the unconscious guard while a burst of shouted countermands came over the speaker, ordering him to remain at his station. In less than a minute, Pendergast was dressed in the guard's uniform, equipped with badge, Mace, Taser, stick, radio, and emergency call unit. He was more slender than the unconscious guard, but a few minor adjustments rendered the disguise quite acceptable.

Next, he reached behind the large rack of servers until he had located the correct port. Then, taking the flash drive from the plastic bag, he inserted it into the port. He then turned his attention back to the guard, taping his mouth shut, his hands behind his back, and his knees together. He dragged the drugged guard back to the nearby men's room, seated him on a toilet, taped his torso to the toilet tank to keep him from falling over, locked the stall, and crawled out beneath the door.

Moving to a mirror, Pendergast pulled the bandages from his face and stuffed them into the waste can. He broke the glass capsule over a sink and massaged the dye into his hair, turning it from white blond to an unremarkable dark brown. Exiting the men's room, he walked down the hall, made a right turn, and—just before coming to the first video camera—he paused to glance at his watch: 660 seconds.

He waited until the display read 640, then continued on, moving at an easy pace, all the while keeping one eye fixed on his watch. He knew that many eyes would be watching the video feeds. Even though he was dressed in a guard's uniform, he was walking in the wrong direction—away from the breakout—and his face was still battered and bruised. They knew him well in building C. Anyone catching a glimpse of him would recognize him.

But he also knew that for ten seconds—from 640 to 630—this particular video feed would be controlled by the flash drive he had plugged into the security computer. The drive would temporarily store the previous ten seconds of feed from that camera and play it back again. It would then leapfrog to the next video camera in the chain and repeat the process. The loop would run only once for each camera: Pendergast had a ten-second window, no more, to pass through each field of view. The timing had to be perfect.

He walked past the camera without incident and continued down

the long, vacant corridors of building C—the guards had been drawn off to other areas by the escapees. Sometimes he quickened his step, sometimes he slowed it, passing each camera at the precise moment in which its video signal would be replayed. Frequently his radio blared. Once, he was passed by a knot of running guards, and he quickly dropped to tie a shoe, turning his swollen, bruised face away from them. They tore by without a glance, their interest otherwise engaged.

He passed the dining hall and kitchen of building C, the smell of disinfectant strong in the air. He took another turn, then another, at last reaching the final stretch of corridor before the checkpoint and security door between Herkmoor Building C/Federal and Herkmoor Building B/State.

Pendergast's face was well known in building C. He was not known at all in building B.

He approached the security door, swiped the credit card, placed his hand on the fingermatrix screen, and waited.

His heart was beating at rather more than its customary rate. This was the moment of truth.

At exactly 290 seconds, the security light glowed green and the metal locks disengaged.

Pendergast stepped through into building B. He walked around the first bend in the corridor, then paused in the dark corner made by the dogleg of the hallway. He reached up to the deepest cut on his cheek and, with a vicious tug, pulled out the row of stitches. When the warm blood began to run, he smeared it over his face, neck, and hands. Then he pulled up his shirt, examining the stitched wound in his side where the shank had penetrated. He took a deep breath. Then he yanked that wound open as well.

They had to look as fresh as possible.

At 110 seconds, he heard running footsteps, and, as previously planned, one of the escapees ran by—Jug—who had dutifully followed the escape plan laid out for him by Glinn. Of course, it would not be successful—he would be apprehended at the exit to building B if not before—but this, too, was part of the plan. Pocho's gang was a smoke screen—that was all. None would actually escape.

As soon as Jug passed him, Pendergast screamed and threw himself down onto the floor of the corridor, while at the same time

pressing the emergency button on his comm unit:

“Officer down! Immediate response! Officer down!”

Chapter 45

Staff Nurse Ralph Kidder knelt over the supine form of the guard—who was sobbing like a baby, babbling about being attacked, being afraid of dying—and tried to focus on the problem at hand. He checked the man's heart with a stethoscope—strong and fast—examined the neck and limbs for any broken bones, took the blood pressure—excellent—examined the cut on the face: nasty but superficial.

“Where are you hurt?” he asked again, exasperated. “Where are your injuries? Talk to me!”

“My face, he cut my face!” the man shrieked, finally gaining a measure of coherence.

“I see that. Where else?”

“He stabbed me! Oh, my chest, it hurts!”

The nurse gently felt the ribs, noting the swelling and faint gravelly feel of a couple of broken ones, not displaced. There was indeed a stab wound, bleeding copiously, but a quick check indicated a rib had deflected the blade and prevented it from piercing the pleura.

“It's nothing that a convalescence won't fix,” Kidder said sharply, turning to the two responding EMTs. “Load him and take him down to infirmary B. We'll do a blood workup, an X-ray series, stitch up a few of those cuts. Tetanus booster and a course of amoxicillin. I don't see anything so far that'll require a transfer to an outside hospital.”

One of the EMTs snorted. “Nothing's going in or out until the escapees are apprehended and all prisoners accounted for, anyway. They've had a morgue-mobile idling outside the gate for half an hour already.”

“The morgue-mobile's never in a rush,” said Kidder dryly. He wrote down the guard's name and badge number on his clipboard. He didn't recognize the man—but then, he was from building C and his face was cut up pretty bad.

As they were loading the patient onto the stretcher, Kidder heard a sudden uproar of shouting from down the corridor as another prisoner was apprehended. Kidder had been working at Herkmoor for almost twenty years and this was the biggest escape attempt yet. Of course it had no chance of succeeding. He just hoped the guards weren't beating hell out of too many would-be escapees.

The EMTs raised the stretcher and trundled the whimpering guard off to the infirmary, Kidder following. These guards acted so tough when everything was under control, he thought, but knock them around a bit and they fell apart like so much overcooked meat.

The infirmary in building B, like the other infirmaries in Herkmoor, was divided into two completely separate, walled-off areas: the free area for staff and guards, and the incarceration area for prisoners. They wheeled the guard to the free area and covered him with a blanket. Kidder worked up the man's chart, ordered some X-rays. He was starting to prep the guard for stitching when his radio beeped. He lifted it to his ear, listened, spoke briefly. Then he turned to the patient. "I've got to leave you for a while."

"Alone?" the injured guard cried in a panic.

"I'll be back in about half an hour, maybe forty-five minutes, with the radiologist. We have some injured inmates—"

"Taking care of inmates before me?" the man whined.

"They're in need of rather more urgent care." Kidder didn't tell him about the call he'd just received. It was as he feared: the guards had beat the crap out of several of the escapees.

"How long will I have to wait?"

Kidder sighed irritably. "Like I said, maybe forty-five minutes." He readied a needle with a mild sedative and painkiller.

"Don't stick me with that!" the man cried. "I've an awful fear of needles!"

Kidder made an effort to control his annoyance. "This'll ease the pain."

"It's not that bad! Turn on the TV for me. That'll distract me."

Kidder shrugged. "Have it your way." He put away the syringe

and handed the patient the remote. The man immediately turned it to an asinine game show and cranked up the volume. Kidder left, shaking his head, his already low opinion of prison guards having sunk even lower.

Fifty minutes later, Kidder returned to the infirmary in a ferociously bad mood. Some of the guards had jumped at the chance to settle scores with a particularly unsavory group of inmates, breaking half a dozen bones in the process.

He checked his watch, wondering about the guard he'd left behind. Fact was, in any of the big New York emergency rooms the man would have had to wait at least twice as long. He pulled back the curtain and gazed at the guard, all bundled up and turned toward the wall, sleeping heavily despite the excessively loud game show playing on the television.

Are you sure, Joy, that door number 2 is your choice? All right, then, let's open it up! Behind door number 2 is... (huge groan from the audience)...

"Time for your X-rays, Mr.—" Kidder glanced at the clipboard. "Mr. Sidesky."

No response.

... a cow! Now, isn't that the most beautiful Holstein cow you've ever seen, ladies and gentlemen? Fresh milk every morning, Joy, think of it!

"Mr. Sidesky?" Kidder said, raising his voice. He reached for the remote, turned off the TV. A sudden, blessed silence.

"X-ray time!"

No response.

Kidder reached over and gave the man's shoulder a gentle push—then jerked back with a muffled cry. Even through the covers, the body felt cold.

It wasn't possible. The man had been brought in an hour ago, alive and healthy.

"Hey, Sidesky! Wake up!" With a trembling hand, he reached out again, pressed on the shoulder—and once again felt that hideous

muffled cold.

With a feeling of dread, he grasped the corner of the covers and drew them back, exposing a naked corpse, purple and grotesquely bloated. The stench of death and disinfectants rose up, enveloping him like a miasma.

He staggered, hand over his mouth, choking, mind reeling in confusion and disbelief. The man had not only died, he had started to decay. How was it possible? He looked around wildly but there was no other patient in the ward. There had been some terrible mistake, some crazy mix-up...

Kidder took a steadying breath. Then he grasped the figure by the shoulder and pulled him over onto his back. The head flopped around, eyes staring, tongue lolling like a dog, face horribly blue and bloated, mouth draining some kind of yellow matter.

“God!” he moaned, backing up. It wasn’t the injured guard at all. It was the dead prisoner he had worked on just the day before, helping the radiologist produce a series of forensic X-rays.

Trying to keep his voice normal, he paged the Herkmoor chief physician. A moment later the man’s irritated voice came over the intercom.

“I’m busy, what is it?”

For a moment, Kidder didn’t quite know what to say. “You know that dead prisoner in the morgue—”

“Lacarra? They carted him away fifteen minutes ago.”

“No. No, they didn’t.”

“Of course they did. I signed the transfer myself, I saw them load the body bag into the morgue-mobile. It was waiting outside the gate for the all-clear so it could come in for the corpse.”

Kidder swallowed. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think what? What the hell are you talking about, Kidder?”

“Pocho Lacarra...” He swallowed, licked dry lips: “... is still here.”

Twenty miles to the south, the mortuary vehicle was on the Taconic State Parkway, heading toward New York City through light traffic. Within minutes, it pulled over at a rest area and cruised to a stop.

Vincent D'Agosta tore off his white morgue uniform, climbed into the rear, and unzipped the body bag. Inside was the long, white, nude form of Special Agent Pendergast. The agent sat up, blinking.

“Pendergast! Damn, we did it! We frigging did it!”

The agent held up a hand. “My dear Vincent, please—no effusive demonstrations of affection until I am showered and dressed.”

Chapter 46

At 6:30 that evening, William Smithback Jr. stood on the sidewalk of Museum Drive, looking up at the brilliantly lit facade of the New York Museum of Natural History. A broad velvet carpet had been unrolled down the great granite steps. A seething crowd of rubberneckers and journalists was held back by velvet ropes and phalanxes of museum guards, while one limousine after another rolled up, disgorging movie stars, city officials, kings and queens of high finance, society matrons, gaunt vacant-eyed fashion models du jour, managing partners, university presidents, and senators—a stupendous parade of money, power, and influence.

The great and powerful ascended the museum steps in a measured flow of black, white, and glitter, looking neither left nor right, heading through the pillared facade and vast bronze doors into a great blaze of light—while the rabble, held back by velvet and brass, gaped, squealed, and photographed. Above, a four-story banner draped over the museum's neoclassical facade billowed in a light breeze. It depicted a gigantic Eye of Horus with words in faux Egyptian script written underneath:

GRAND OPENING

THE GREAT TOMB OF SENEF

Smithback adjusted the silk tie of his tuxedo and smoothed his lapels. Having arrived in a cab instead of a limo, he had been forced to get out a block shy of the museum and had pushed his way through the crowd until he'd arrived at the ropes. He showed his invitation to a suspicious guard, who called over another, and after several minutes of confabulation they grudgingly allowed him through—right in the perfumed wake of Wanda Meursault, the actress who had made such a fuss at the Sacred Images opening. Smithback considered how distressing it must have been when she lost out in her bid for Best Actress at the recent Academy Awards. With a thrill of pleasure, he marched in the parade of power and passed through the shining gates.

This was going to be the mother of all openings.

The velvet carpet led across the Great Rotunda, with its brace of mounted dinosaurs, through the magnificent African Hall, and from

there wound its way through half a dozen musty halls and half-forgotten corridors to arrive at a set of elevators, where the crowd had backed up. It was quite a distance from the entrance, Smithback thought as he waited in line for the next elevator—but the Tomb of Senef was located in the very bowels of the museum, about as far from the front entrance as you could get. He adjusted the knot of his tie. The hike might just pump a little blood through some of these dried-out old husks, he thought. Do them good.

A chime announced the arrival of the next car and he filed in with the rest of them, packed in like black and white sardines, waiting for the elevator to make the crawl to the basement. The doors opened again at last and they were greeted with another blaze of light, the swirling sounds of an orchestra, and beyond, the great Egyptian Hall itself, its nineteenth-century murals beautifully restored. Along the walls, gold, jewels, and faience glittered from every case, while exquisitely laid tea tables and dining tables, flickering with thousands of candles, covered the marble floors. Most important, Smithback thought as his eye roved about, were the long tables along the walls groaning with smoked sturgeon and salmon, crusty homemade breads, huge platters of hand-cut San Daniele prosciutto, silver tubs of pearly-gray sevruga and beluga caviar. Massive silver cauldrons heaped with shaved ice stood at either end, bristling with bottles of Veuve Clicquot like so many batteries of artillery, waiting to be fired and poured.

And these, Smithback thought, were merely the hors d'oeuvres—the dinner was yet to come. He rubbed his hands together, savoring the splendid sight and looking about for his wife, Nora, whom he had hardly seen in the past week, and shivering slightly at the thought of other, more intimate pleasures to be enjoyed later, once this party—and this whole hectic and dreadful week—had finally come to a close.

He was contemplating which of the food tables to assault first when he felt an arm slip through his from behind.

“Nora!” He turned to embrace her. She was dressed in a sleek black gown, tastefully embroidered with silver thread. “You look ravishing!”

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” Nora reached up and smoothed his unrepentant cowlick, which promptly sprang up again, defying gravity. “My handsome overgrown boy.”

“My Egyptian queen. How’s your neck feeling, by the way?”

“It’s fine, and please stop asking.”

“This is amazing. Oh, God, what a spread.” Smithback looked around. “And to think—you’re the curator. This is your show.”

“I had nothing to do with the party.” She glanced over at the entrance to the Tomb of Senef, closed and draped with a red ribbon, waiting to be cut. “My show’s in there.”

A slim waiter came sweeping by, bearing a silver tray loaded with flutes of champagne, and Smithback snagged two as the man passed, handing one to Nora.

“To the Tomb of Senef,” he said.

They clinked glasses and drank.

“Let’s get some food before the crush,” said Nora. “I’ve only got a few minutes. At seven, I’ve got to say a few words, and then there’ll be other speeches, dinner, and the show. You won’t see much of me, Bill. I’m sorry.”

“Later, I’ll see more.”

As they approached the tables, Smithback noticed a tall, striking, mahogany-haired woman standing nearby, dressed incongruously in black slacks and a gray silk shirt, open at the neck, set off by a simple string of pearls. It was down-dressing in the extreme, and yet somehow she managed to pull it off, make it look classy, even elegant.

“This is the museum’s new Egyptologist,” said Nora, turning to the woman. “Viola Maskelene. This is my husband, Bill Smithback.”

Smithback was taken aback. “Viola Maskelene? The one who... ?” He quickly recovered, extending his hand. “Very pleased to meet you.”

“Hullo,” the woman said in a cultured, faintly amused accent. “I’ve enjoyed working with Nora these past few days. What a museum!”

“Yes,” said Smithback. “Quite the noble pile. Viola, tell me...” Smithback could hardly restrain his curiosity. “How, er, did you happen to end up here in the museum?”

“It was a last-minute thing. With Adrian’s tragic death, the museum needed an Egyptologist right away, someone with expertise

on the New Kingdom and the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Hugo Menzies knew of my work, it seems, and suggested my name. I was delighted to take the job.”

Smithback was about to open his mouth to ask another question when he caught Nora casting him a warning look: now was not the time to start pumping her for information about the kidnapping. Still, he reflected, it was mighty strange that Maskelene was so suddenly back in New York—and at the museum, no less. All Smithback’s journalism bells were ringing: this was far too much a coincidence. It bore looking into... tomorrow.

“Quite a spread,” Viola said, turning to the food tables. “I’m starving. Shall we?”

“We shall,” said Smithback.

They elbowed up to the teeming tables, and Smithback, gently easing aside a meek curator, reached out and loaded up a plate with a good two ounces of caviar, a tall stack of blinis, and a dollop of crème fraîche. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw, with surprise, that Viola was heaping her plate with an even more unseemly amount of food, apparently as dismissive of decorum as he was.

She caught his eye, colored slightly, then winked. “Haven’t eaten since last night,” she said. “They’ve had me working nonstop.”

“Go right ahead!” Smithback said, scooping up a second mound of caviar, delighted to have a partner in crime.

A sudden burst of music came from the small orchestra at the end of the hall, and there was a smattering of applause as Hugo Menzies, magnificent in white tie and tails, mounted a podium next to the orchestra. A hush fell on the hall as his glittering blue eyes surveyed the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he said. “I won’t inflict a long speech on you tonight, because we have far more interesting entertainment planned. Let me just read you an e-mail I received from the Count of Cahors, who made this all possible with his extraordinarily generous donation:

My dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am desolate not to join you in these festivities celebrating the reopening of the Tomb of Senef. I am an old man and can no longer

travel. But I shall raise a glass to you and wish you a spectacular evening.

With kindest regards,

Le Comte Thierry de Cahors

A thunder of applause greeted this short missive from the reclusive count. When it died down, Menzies resumed.

“And now,” he said, “I have the pleasure of introducing to you the great soprano Antonella da Rimini as Aïda, joined by tenor Gilles de Montparnasse as Radamès, who will sing for you arias from the final scene of Aïda, ‘La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse,’ which will be sung in English, for the benefit of those of you who do not speak Italian.”

More applause. An enormously fat woman, heavily painted and eyelined, and squeezed to bursting into a faux Egyptian costume, stepped onto the stage, followed by an equally large man in similar garb.

“Viola and I have to go,” Nora whispered to Smithback. “We’re on next.” She gave his hand a squeeze, then left with Viola Maskelene in tow, disappearing into the crowd.

Another round of applause shook the hall as the conductor mounted the stage. Smithback marveled at the enthusiasm of the guests—they had hardly had time to get lubricated. Glancing around while munching a blini, he was surprised at the number of notable faces: senators, captains of industry, movie stars, pillars of society, foreign dignitaries, and of course, the full spread of museum trustees and assorted bigwigs. If somebody nuked the joint, he reflected ghoulishly, the repercussions wouldn’t be just national—they’d be global.

The lights dimmed and the conductor raised his baton, the audience falling into silence. Then the orchestra began a dolorous motif as Radamès sang:

The fatal stone above has sealed my doom,

Here is my tomb! The light of day

I shall never see again... Nor shall I see Aïda.

Aïda, my love, where are you? May you live happily,

My hideous fate forever unknown!

But what is that sound? A slithering serpent? A ghoulish vision?

No! A dim human form I see.

By the gods! Aïda!

And now the diva sang out:

Yes, it is I.

Smithback, a confirmed opera-hater, made an effort to shut out the shrieking voice while he returned his attention to the loaded tables. Shouldering his way through the crowd, he took advantage of the temporary lull in the feeding frenzy to scoop up half a dozen oysters; on top of this, he laid two thick slabs cut from an ancient, moldy round of French cheese, added a stack of paper-thin slices of prosciutto and two slices of tongue. Balancing the tottery stack, he moved to the next table and snagged a second flute of champagne, asking the bartender to top it off for efficiency's sake so he wouldn't have to return as quickly for a refill. Then he made his way to one of the candlelit tables to enjoy his booty.

A free feed like this came only rarely, and Smithback was determined to make the most of it.

Chapter 47

Eli Glinn was waiting for the morgue vehicle at the anonymous door to the EES building. Sending someone to deal with the vehicle, he whisked Pendergast off for a shower and change of clothes and assigned D'Agosta to a robotically silent, white-coated technician. The technician had D'Agosta wait while he made a few brief phone calls; then he led the way through the cavernous, echoing space that comprised the heart of the Effective Engineering Solutions building. The large room was quiet, as one would expect at half past seven on a weeknight: even so, several scientists could be seen scribbling on whiteboards or peering at computer monitors, amidst an air of studious efficiency. As he walked past the lab tables, the scientific equipment, and the models, he wondered just how many of the employees knew that their building currently harbored one of the fed's top fugitives.

D'Agosta followed the technician into a waiting elevator in the rear wall. The man inserted a key into a control panel and pressed the down button. The car descended for a surprisingly long interval before the doors opened onto a pale blue corridor. Motioning D'Agosta to follow, the technician strode down it, stopping at last before a door. He smiled, nodded, then turned and walked back in the direction of the elevator.

D'Agosta stared at the retreating form. Then he glanced back at the unmarked door. After a moment, he gave a tentative knock.

It was immediately opened by a short, cheerful-looking man with a florid face and a closely cropped beard. He ushered D'Agosta in and closed the door behind him.

"You are Lieutenant D'Agosta, yes?" he asked in an accent D'Agosta assumed to be German. "Please have a seat. I am Dr. Rolf Krasner."

The office had the spare, clinical air of a doctor's consultation room, with gray carpets, white walls, and anonymous furnishings. A rosewood table stood in the middle, brilliantly polished. In its center sat what looked like a technical manual—thick as the Manhattan telephone book and bound in black plastic. Eli Glinn had already wheeled himself into position at the far side of the table. He nodded

silently to D'Agosta and gestured toward an empty chair.

As D'Agosta seated himself, a door in the back of the room opened and Pendergast appeared. His wounds had been freshly dressed and his hair, still damp from being washed, had been combed back. He was dressed, most incongruously, in a white turtleneck and gray wool pants, which—different as they were from his habitual black suit—almost had the effect of a disguise.

D'Agosta rose instinctively.

Pendergast's eyes met his, and after a moment he smiled. "I fear I neglected to express my gratitude to you for freeing me from prison."

"You know you don't have to do that," said D'Agosta, coloring.

"But I will. Thank you very much, my dear Vincent." He spoke softly, taking D'Agosta's hand in his own and giving it a curt shake. D'Agosta felt strangely moved by this man who sometimes found even the simplest human courtesies awkward.

"Please sit down," said Glinn in the same neutral voice—devoid of any human feeling—that had so annoyed D'Agosta on their first meeting.

He complied. Pendergast slipped into a seat opposite—a little stiffly, D'Agosta thought, yet with his usual feline grace. "And I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to you as well, Mr. Glinn," Pendergast went on. "A most successful operation."

Glinn nodded curtly.

"Although I deeply regret having to kill Mr. Lacarra to do so."

"As you know," Glinn replied, "there was no other way. You had to kill an inmate in order to escape in his body bag, and that inmate, furthermore, had to take his exercise in yard 4, the ideal spot for an abortive escape. We were fortunate—if I may be permitted that expression—to identify a yard 4 inmate who was so thoroughly evil that some might say he deserved to die: a man who tortured three children to death in front of their mother. It was then a simple matter to hack into the Justice Department database and change Lacarra's arrest records to identify him as one of your 'collars'—thus baiting the trap for Coffey. Finally, I might point out that you were forced to kill him: it was self-defense."

“No amount of sophistry will change the fact it was a premeditated killing.”

“Strictly speaking, you are correct. But as you know yourself, his death was necessary to save more lives—perhaps many more lives. And our model indicated his death sentence appeals would have been denied, anyway.”

Pendergast silently inclined his head.

“Now, Mr. Pendergast, let us lay trivial ethical dilemmas aside. We have urgent business to take care of, relating to your brother. I assume no news from the outside world reached you while in solitary confinement?”

“None whatsoever.”

“Then it would be a surprise to learn that your brother destroyed all the diamonds he stole from the museum.”

D’Agosta saw Pendergast stiffen visibly.

“That’s right. Diogenes pulverized the diamonds and returned them to the museum as a sack of powder.”

After a silence, Pendergast said, “Once again, his actions were beyond my ability to predict or comprehend.”

“If it’s any consolation to you, they surprised us as well. It meant our assumptions about him were wrong. We believed that after being cheated of Lucifer’s Heart—the one diamond he most desired—your brother would go to ground for a period, lick his wounds, plot his next move. Clearly, that was not the case.”

Krasner broke in, his cheerful voice in stark contrast to Glinn’s monotone. “By destroying the very diamonds he had spent many years planning to steal, diamonds that he both desired and needed, Diogenes was destroying a part of himself. It was a suicide of sorts. He was abandoning himself to his demons.”

“When we learned what happened to the diamonds,” Glinn went on, “we realized our preliminary psychological profile was woefully insufficient. And so we went back to the drawing board, reanalyzed existing data, gathered additional information. That is the result.” He nodded to the thick volume. “I’ll spare you the details. It boils down to one thing.”

“And that is?”

“The ‘perfect crime’ which Diogenes spoke of was not the theft of the diamonds. Nor was it the outrage he perpetrated on you: killing your friends and then framing you for the crimes. Whatever his original intent was we are in no position to speculate. But the fact remains that his ultimate crime has yet to be committed.”

“But the date in his letter?”

“Another lie, or at least diversion. The theft of the diamonds was part of his plan, but their destruction was apparently a more spontaneous act. That doesn’t change the fact that his series of crimes was carefully planned to keep you occupied, to mislead you, to stay one step ahead of you. I must say, the depth and complexity of your brother’s plan is quite breathtaking.”

“So the crime is yet to come,” Pendergast said in a dry, quiet voice. “Do you know what it is, or when it will take place?”

“No—except that all indications are that this crime is imminent. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps tonight. Hence the need for your immediate liberation from Herkmoor.”

Pendergast was silent a moment. “I fail to see how I can be of any help,” he said, his voice tinged with bitterness. “As you see, I’ve been wrong at every turn.”

“Agent Pendergast, you are the one person—the only person—who can help. And you know how.”

When Pendergast did not immediately respond, Glinn went on. “We had hoped our forensic profile would have predictive power—that it would provide a sense of what Diogenes’s future action would be. And it has... to a point. We know he’s motivated by a powerful feeling of victimization, the sense that a terrible wrong was done to him. We believe his ‘perfect crime’ will attempt to perpetrate a similar wrong on a large number of people.”

“That is correct,” Krasner broke in. “Your brother wants to generalize this wrong, to make it public, to force others to share his pain.”

Glinn leaned over the table and stared at Pendergast. “And we know something else. You are the person who inflicted this pain on your brother—at least, that’s how he perceives it.”

“That is absurd,” said Pendergast.

“Something happened between you and your brother at an early age: something so dreadful it twisted his already warped mind and set in motion the events he’s playing out now. Our analysis is missing a vital piece of information: what happened between you and Diogenes. And the memory of that event is locked up there.” Glinn pointed at Pendergast’s head.

“We’ve been through this before,” Pendergast replied stiffly. “I’ve already told you everything of importance that has passed between my brother and myself. I even submitted to a rather curious interview with the good Dr. Krasner here—without result. There is no hidden atrocity. I would remember: I have a photographic memory.”

“Forgive my disagreeing with you, but this event happened. It must have. There’s no other explanation.”

“I’m sorry, then. Because even if you’re right, I have no recollection of any such event—and there’s clearly no way for me to recall it. You’ve already tried and failed.”

Glinn tented his hands, looked down at them. For a moment, the room went still.

“I think there is a way,” he said without looking up.

When there was no response, Glinn raised his head again. “You’re schooled in a certain ancient discipline, a secret mystical philosophy practiced by a tiny order of monks in Bhutan and Tibet. One facet of this discipline is spiritual. Another is physical: a complex series of ritualized movements not unlike the kata of Shotokan karate. And still another is intellectual: a form of meditation, of concentration, that allows the practitioner to unleash the full potential of the human mind. I refer to the secret rituals of the Dzogchen and its even more rarefied practice, the Chongg Ran.”

“How did you come by this information?” Pendergast asked in a voice so cold D’Agosta felt his blood freeze.

“Agent Pendergast, please. The acquisition of knowledge is our primary stock-in-trade. In trying to learn more about you—for purposes of better understanding your brother—we have spoken to a great many people. One of them was Cornelia Delamere Pendergast, your great-aunt. Current residence: the Mount Mercy Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Then there was a certain associate of yours, Miss

Corrie Swanson, enrolled as a senior at Phillips Exeter Academy. She was a rather more difficult subject, but we ultimately learned what we needed to.”

Glinn regarded Pendergast with his Sphinx-like gaze. Pendergast returned the look, his pale cat’s eyes hardly blinking. The tension in the conference room increased rapidly; D’Agosta felt the hairs on his arms standing on end.

At last Pendergast spoke. “This prying into my private life goes far beyond the bounds of your employ.”

Glinn did not reply.

“I use the memory crossing in a strictly impersonal way—as a forensic tool, to re-create the scene of a crime or a historical event. That is all. It would have no value with such a... personal matter.”

“No value?” A dry tone of skepticism crept into Glinn’s voice.

“On top of that, it is a very difficult technique. Attempting to apply it here would be a waste of time. Just like the little game that Dr. Krasner tried to play with me.”

Glinn leaned forward again in his wheelchair, still staring at Pendergast. When he spoke, his voice carried a sudden urgency.

“Mr. Pendergast, isn’t it possible that the same event which has marred your brother so terribly—which turned him into a monster—scarred you as well? Isn’t it possible you have walled up its memory so completely that you no longer have any conscious recollection of it?”

“Mr. Glinn—”

“Tell me,” Glinn said, his voice growing louder. “Isn’t it possible?”

Pendergast looked at him, gray eyes glinting. “I suppose it is remotely possible.”

“If it is possible, and if this memory does exist, and if this memory will help us find that last missing piece, and if by doing so we can save lives and defeat your brother... isn’t it at least worth trying?”

The two men held each other’s gaze for less than a minute, but to D’Agosta it seemed to last forever. Then Pendergast looked down. His

shoulders slumped visibly. Wordlessly he nodded.

“Then we must proceed,” Glinn went on. “What do you require?”

Pendergast did not reply for a moment. Then he seemed to rouse himself. “Privacy,” he said.

“Will the Berggasse studio suffice?”

“Yes.”

Pendergast placed both hands on the arms of the chair and pushed himself upright. Without a glance at the others in the room, he turned and made his way back toward the room from which he’d emerged.

“Agent Pendergast... ?” Glinn said.

Hand on the doorknob, Pendergast half turned.

“I know how difficult this ordeal will be. But this is not the time for half measures. There can be no holding back. Whatever it is, it must be faced—and confronted—in its totality. Agreed?”

Pendergast nodded.

“Then good luck.”

A wintry smile passed briefly over the agent’s face. Then, without another word, he opened the door to the study and slipped out of sight.

Chapter 48

Captain of Homicide Laura Hayward stood to the left of the Egyptian Hall entrance, gazing dubiously over the crowd. She had dressed in a dark suit, the better to blend in with the crowd, the only sign of her authority the tiny gold captain's bars pinned to her lapel. Her weapon, a basic Smith & Wesson .38, was in its holster under her suit jacket.

The scene that greeted her eyes was one of textbook security. Her people, plainclothed and uniformed, were all at their appointed stations. They were the best she had—truly New York's finest. The museum guard presence was there as well, deliberately obtrusive, adding at least a psychological sense of security. Manetti had so far been fully cooperative. The rest of the museum had been painstakingly secured. Hayward had run dozens of disaster scenarios through her head, drawing up plans to deal with every contingency, even the most unlikely: suicide bomber, fire, security system malfunction, power failure, computer failure.

The only weakness was the tomb itself—it had only one exit. But it was a large exit, and at the insistence of the NYC fire marshals, the tomb and all its contents had been specially fireproofed. She herself had made sure the tomb's security doors could be opened or closed from the inside or outside, manually or electronically, even in the case of a total power failure. She had stood in the control room, occupying the empty room next to the tomb, and had operated the software that opened and closed the doors.

The toxicological teams had made not one sweep, not two, but three—the results uniformly negative. And now she stood, surveying the crowd, asking herself, What could possibly go wrong?

Her intellect answered loud and clear: Nothing.

But her gut sensed otherwise. She felt almost physically sick with unease. It was irrational; it made no sense.

Once more, she delved deep into her cop instincts, trying to discover the source of the feeling. As usual, her thoughts formed almost automatically into a list. And this time the list was all about Diogenes Pendergast.

Diogenes was alive.

He had kidnapped Viola Maskelene.

He had attacked Margo.

He had stolen the diamond collection—and then destroyed it.

He had probably been responsible for at least some of the killings ascribed to Pendergast.

He spent a great deal of time in the museum in some unknown capacity, most likely posing as a curator.

Both perps—Lipper and Wicherly—had been involved with the Tomb of Senef, and both had suddenly gone mad after being in the tomb. And yet a meticulous examination of the tomb and the hall had produced no evidence whatsoever of any kind of environmental or electrical problem—certainly nothing that could trigger psychotic breaks or brain damage. Was Diogenes somehow to blame? What on earth was he planning?

Against her will, her mind returned to the conversation she'd had with D'Agosta in her office days before. All of what he's done so far—the killings, the kidnapping, the diamond theft—has been leading up to something else. Those had been his words. Something bigger, maybe much bigger.

She shivered. Her conjectures, her questions about Diogenes—it was all linked, it had to be. It was part of a plan.

But what was the plan?

Hayward hadn't the slightest idea. And yet her gut told her it would happen tonight. It couldn't be coincidence. This was the "something else" D'Agosta had talked about.

Her eyes traveled around the room, making contact with her people, one by one. As she did so, she picked out the many famous faces in the hall: the mayor, the speaker pro tem of the House, the governor, at least one of the state's two senators. And there were many others: CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, Hollywood producers, a smattering of actors and television personalities. Then there were the museum staff she knew: Collopy, Menzies, Nora Kelly...

Her eyes moved to the PBS television crew, which had set up at

one end of the hall and was filming the gala live. A second crew had set up inside the as-yet-unopened tomb, ready to film the first VIP tour of the exhibition and the sound-and-light show that would be part of it.

Yes—that would be part of the plan. Whatever was going to happen would happen live, with millions watching. And if Diogenes’s alter ego was a curator, or somebody else highly placed in the museum, he would have the power and the access necessary to engineer almost anything. But who could he be? Manetti’s careful probing of the museum’s personnel files turned up nothing. If only they had a picture of Diogenes that was less than twenty-five years old, a fingerprint, a bit of DNA...

What was the plan?

Her eye ended up at the closed door to the tomb, the steel now covered with a faux stone finish, a huge red ribbon stretched across its front.

Her feeling of sickness increased. And along with it came a desperate feeling of isolation. She had done everything in her power to stop, or at least postpone, this opening. But she had convinced nobody. Even Police Commissioner Rocker, her ally in the past, had demurred.

Was it all in her mind? Had the pressure finally gotten to her? If only she had someone who saw things her way, who understood the background, the true nature of Diogenes. Someone like D’Agosta.

D’Agosta. He had been ahead of her at every step of the investigation. He knew what was going to happen before it happened. Long before anyone else, he’d known the kind of criminal they were up against. He had insisted Diogenes was alive even when she and everyone else had “proved” he was dead.

And he knew the museum—knew it cold. He’d been involved in cases connected to the museum going back half a dozen years or more. He knew the players. God, if only he were here now... Not D’Agosta the man—that was over—but D’Agosta the cop.

She controlled her breathing. No point wishing for the impossible. She had done all she could. There was nothing left now but to wait, watch, and be ready to act.

Once again her eye roved the crowd, gauged the flow, examined

each face for unnatural tension, excitement, anxiety.

Suddenly she froze. There, standing by the group of dignitaries near the podium, stood the tall figure of a woman: a woman she recognized.

All her alarm bells went off. Making an effort to control her voice, she raised her radio. “Manetti, Hayward here, do you read?”

“Copy.”

“Is that Viola Maskelene I’m looking at? Over by the podium.”

A pause. “That’s her.”

Hayward swallowed. “What’s she doing here?”

“She was hired to replace that Egyptologist, Wicherly.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. A day or two ago.”

“Who hired her?”

“Anthropology, I think.”

“Why wasn’t her name on the guest list?”

A hesitation. “I’m not sure. Probably because she was such a recent hire.”

Hayward wanted to say more. She wanted to curse into the radio. She wanted to demand to know why she hadn’t been told. But it was too late for all that. Instead, she merely said, “Over and out.”

The profile indicated that Diogenes isn’t through.

The whole gala opening looked like a meticulous setup—but for what?

D’Agosta’s words rang in her ears like a Klaxon. Something bigger, maybe much bigger.

Jesus, she needed D’Agosta—she needed him right now. He had the answers she didn’t.

She pulled out her personal phone, tried his cellular. No response.

She glanced at her watch: 7:15. The evening was still young. If she could find him, get him back here... Where the hell could he be? Once again, his words echoed in her mind:

There's something else you ought to know. Have you heard of the forensic profiling firm of Effective Engineering Solutions, down on Little West 12th Street, run by an Eli Glinn? I've been spending most of my time down there recently, moonlighting...

It was just a chance—but it was better than nothing. It sure beat waiting here, twiddling her thumbs. With luck, she could be there and back in less than forty minutes.

She lifted her radio again. "Lieutenant Gault?"

"Copy."

"I'm heading out briefly. You're in charge."

"There's somebody I need to speak with. If anything—anything—out of the ordinary happens, you have my authority to shut this down. Totally. You understand?"

"Yes, Captain."

She pocketed the radio and walked briskly out of the hall.

Chapter49

Pendergast stood in the small study, back pressed against the door, motionless. His eyes took in the rich furnishings: the couch covered with Persian rugs, the African masks, the side table, bookshelves, curious objets d'art.

He took a steadying breath. With a great effort of will, he made his way to the couch, lay down upon it slowly, folded his hands over his chest, crossed his ankles, and closed his eyes.

Over his professional career, Pendergast had found himself in many difficult and dangerous circumstances. And yet none of these equaled what he now faced in this little room.

He began with a series of simple physical exercises. He slowed his breathing and decelerated his heartbeat. He blocked out all external sensation: the rustle of the forced-air heating system, the faint smell of furniture polish, the pressure of the couch beneath him, his own corporeal awareness.

At last—when his respiration was barely discernible and his pulse hovered close to forty beats per minute—he allowed a chessboard to materialize before his mind's eye. His hands drifted over the well-worn pieces. A white pawn was moved forward on the board. A black pawn responded. The game continued, moving to stalemate. Another game began, ending the same way. Then another game, and another...

... but without the expected result. Pendergast's memory palace—the storehouse of knowledge and information in which he kept his most personal secrets, and from which he carried out his most profound meditation and introspection—did not materialize before him.

Mentally, Pendergast switched games, moving from chess to bridge. Now, instead of setting two players against each other, he posited four, playing as partners, with the infinity of strategy, signals both missed and made, and plays of the hand that could result. Quickly he played through a rubber, then another.

The memory palace refused to appear. It remained out of reach, shifting, insubstantial.

Pendergast waited, reducing his heartbeat and respiration still further. Such a failure had never occurred before.

Now, delving into one of the most difficult of the Chongg Ran exercises, he mentally detached his consciousness from his body, then rose above it, floating incorporeal in space. Without opening his eyes, he re-created a virtual construct of the room in which he lay, imagining every object in its place, until the entire room had materialized in his mind, complete to the last detail. He lingered over it for several moments. And then, piece by piece, he proceeded to remove the furnishings, the carpeting, the wallpaper, until at last everything was gone once again.

But he did not stop there. Next, he proceeded to remove all the bustling city that surrounded the room: initially, structure by structure, then block by block, and then neighborhood by neighborhood, the act of intellectual oblivion gaining speed as it raced outward in all directions. Counties next; then states; nations, the world, the universe, all fell away into blackness.

Within minutes, everything was gone. Only Pendergast himself remained, floating in an infinite void. He then willed his own body to disappear, consumed by darkness. The universe was now entirely empty, stripped clean of all thought, all pain and memory, all tangible existence. He had reached the state known as Sunyata: for a moment—or was it an eternity?—time itself ceased to exist.

And then at last, the ancient mansion on Dauphine Street began to materialize in his mind: the Maison de la Rochenoire, the house in which he and Diogenes had grown up. Pendergast stood on the old cobbled street before it, gazing through the high wrought-iron fence to the mansion's mansard roofs, oriel windows, widow's walk, battlements, and stone pinnacles. High brick walls on one side hid lush, interior parterre gardens.

In his mind, Pendergast opened the huge iron gates and walked up the front drive, pausing on the portico. The whitewashed double doors lay open before him, giving onto the grand foyer.

After a moment of uncharacteristic indecision, he stepped through the doors and onto the marble floor of the hall. A huge crystal chandelier sparkled brilliantly overhead, hovering beneath the trompe l'oeil ceiling. Ahead, a double curved staircase with elaborately beaded newels swept up toward the second-floor gallery. On the left, closed doors led into the long, low-ceilinged exhibition hall; on the

right lay the open doorway into a dim, wood-paneled library.

Although the real family mansion had been burned to the ground by a New Orleans mob many years before, Pendergast had retained this virtual mansion within his memory ever since: an intellectual artifact, perfect down to the last detail; a storehouse in which he kept not only his own experiences and observations, but innumerable family secrets as well. Normally, entering into this palace of memory was a tranquilizing, calming experience: each drawer of each cabinet of each room held some past event, or some personal reflection on history or science, to be perused at leisure. Today, however, Pendergast felt a profound unease, and it was only with the greatest mental effort he was able to keep the mansion cohesive in his mind.

He crossed the foyer and mounted the stairs to the wide second-floor hallway. Hesitating only briefly at the landing, he moved down the tapestried corridor, the broad sweep of the rose-colored walls broken at intervals by marble niches or ancient gilt frames containing portraits in oils. The smell of the mansion now swept over him: a combination of old fabric and leather, furniture polish, his mother's perfume, his father's Latakia tobacco.

Near the center of this hallway lay the heavy oak door to his own room. But he did not proceed that far. Instead, he stopped at the door just before it: a door that, strangely, had been sealed in lead and covered with a sheet of hammered brass, its edges nailed into the surrounding door frame.

This was the room of his brother, Diogenes. Pendergast himself had mentally sealed this door years before, locking the room forever inside the memory palace. It was the one room into which he had promised himself never again to enter.

And yet—if Eli Glinn was right—he must enter it. There was no choice.

As Pendergast paused outside the door, hesitating, he became aware that his pulse and respiration were increasing at an alarming rate. The walls of the mansion around him flickered and glowed, growing brighter, then fading, like the filament of a lightbulb failing under too much current. He was losing his elaborate mental construct. He made a supreme effort to concentrate, to calm his mind, and managed to steady the image around him.

He had to move quickly: the memory crossing could shatter at

any moment under the force of his own emotions. He could not maintain the necessary concentration indefinitely.

He willed a pry bar, chisel, and mallet to appear in his hands. He wedged the pry bar under the brass sheet, pulling it away from the door frame, moving around the four sides until he had pried it off. Dropping the bar, he took up the chisel and mallet and began hammering loose the soft lead that had been packed in the cracks between the door and the frame, digging and carving it out in chunks. He worked rapidly, trying to lose himself in the task, thinking of nothing but the job at hand.

Within minutes, curls of lead lay over the carpeting. Now the only impediment to what lay on the far side of the door was its heavy lock.

Pendergast stepped forward, tried the handle. Normally, he would have picked it with the set of tools he always carried with him. But there was no time even for this: any pause, however brief, might be fatal. He stepped back, raised his foot, aimed at a point just below the lock, and gave the door a savage kick. It flew back, slamming against the interior wall with a crash. Pendergast stood in the doorway, breathing heavily. The room of Diogenes, his brother, lay beyond.

And yet there was nothing visible. The mellow light of the hallway did not penetrate the infinite gloom. The doorway was a rectangle of blackness.

Pendergast tossed aside the chisel and mallet. A moment's thought brought a powerful flashlight into his hand. He snapped on the light and pointed the beam into the gloom, which seemed to suck the very light out of the air.

Pendergast tried to take a step forward but found he could not will his limbs to move. He stood there, on the threshold, for what seemed like an eternity. The house began to wobble, the walls evaporating as if made of air, and he realized he was once again losing the memory palace. He knew if he lost it now, he'd never return. Ever.

It was only by a final act of supreme will—the most focused, draining, and difficult moment he had ever faced—that Pendergast forced himself over the threshold.

He stopped again just beyond, prematurely exhausted, playing the flashlight around, forcing the beam to lick ever farther into the darkness. It was not the room he expected to find. Instead, he was at

the top of a narrow stairway of undressed stone, winding down into the living rock, twisting deeply into the earth.

At this sight, something dark stirred within Pendergast's mind: a rough beast that had slumbered, undisturbed, for over thirty years. For a moment, he felt himself falter and his will fail. The walls trembled like a candle flame in the wind.

He recovered. He had no choice now but to go forward. Taking a fresh grip on the flashlight, he began to descend the worn, slippery steps of stone: deeper, ever deeper, into a maw of shame, regret—and infinite horror.

Chapter 50

Pendergast descended the staircase, the smell of the sub-basement coming up to him: a cloying odor of damp, mold, iron rust, and death. The staircase ended in a dark tunnel. The mansion had one of the few belowground basements in New Orleans—created at great expense and labor by the monks who originally built the structure, and who had lined the walls with sheets of hammered lead and carefully fitted stone to make cellars for aging their wines and brandies.

The Pendergast family had converted it to another use entirely.

In his mind, Pendergast made his way down the tunnel, which opened onto a broad, low open space, the irregular floor part earth, part stone, with a groined ceiling. The walls were encrusted with niter, and dim marble crypts, elaborately carved in Victorian and Edwardian style, filled the expanse, separated from one another by narrow walkways of brick.

Suddenly he became aware of a presence in the room: a small shadow. Then he heard the shadow speak with a seven-year-old voice: “Are you sure you want to keep going?”

With another shock, Pendergast realized there was a second figure in the dim space: taller, more slender, with white-blond hair. He felt chilled to the bone—it was himself, nine years old. He heard his own smooth, childish voice speak: “You’re not afraid?”

“No. Of course not,” came the small, defiant return—the voice of his brother, Diogenes.

“Well, then.”

Pendergast watched as the two dim figures made their way through the necropolis, candles in hand, the taller one leading the way.

He felt a rising dread. He didn’t remember this at all—and yet he knew something fearful was about to happen.

The fair-haired figure began examining the carved fronts of the tombs, reading the Latin inscriptions in a high, clear voice. They had

both taken to Latin with great enthusiasm. Diogenes, Pendergast remembered, had always been the better Latin student; his teacher thought him a genius.

“Here’s an odd one,” said the older boy. “Take a look, Diogenes.”

The smaller figure crept up and read:

ERASMUS LONGCHAMPS PENDERGAST

1840 - 1932

De mortis aut bene aut nihil

“Do you recognize the line?”

“Horace?” said the younger figure. “Of the dead’... hmmm... ‘speak well or say nothing.’”

After a silence, the older boy said, with a touch of condescension, “Bravo, little brother.”

“I wonder,” asked Diogenes, “what it was about his life he didn’t want talked about?”

Pendergast remembered his youthful rivalry with his brother over Latin... one in which he was eventually left far behind.

They moved on to an elaborate double crypt, a sarcophagus in the Roman style topped with a man and woman in marble, both laid out in death with hands crossed on their breasts.

“Louisa de Nemours Prendergast. Henri Prendergast. Nemo nisi mors,” read the older boy. “Let’s see... That must be ‘Till death do us part.’”

The smaller boy had already moved to another tombstone. Crouching, he read, “Multa ferunt anni venientes commoda secum, Multa recedentes adimunt.” He looked up. “Well, Aloysius, what do you make of that?”

A silence followed, and then the response came, bravely but a little uncertain. “Many years come to make us comfortable, many receding years diminish us.”

The translation was greeted with a sarcastic snicker. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Of course it does.”

“No, it doesn’t. ‘Many receding years diminish us’? That’s nonsense. I think it means something like ‘The years, as they come, bring many comforts. As they recede, they...’” He paused. “Adimiunt?”

“Just what I said: diminish,” said the older boy.

“As they recede, they diminish us,” finished Diogenes. “In other words, when you’re young, the years bring good. But as you grow old, the years take it all away again.”

“That makes no more sense than mine,” said Aloysius, annoyance in his voice. He moved on toward the back of the necropolis, down another narrow row of crypts, reading more names and inscriptions. At the end of the cul-de-sac, he paused at a marble door set into the back wall, a rusted metal grate over it.

“Look at this tomb,” he said.

Diogenes came up close, peered at it with his candle. “Where’s the inscription?”

“There isn’t one. But it’s a crypt. It’s got to be a door.” Aloysius reached up, gave the grate a pull. Nothing. He pushed at it, pulled it, and then picked up a stray fragment of marble and began tapping around its edges. “Maybe it’s empty.”

“Maybe it’s meant for us,” the younger boy said, a ghoulisg gleam appearing in his eyes.

“It’s hollow back there.” Aloysius redoubled his tapping and gave the grate another tug—and then suddenly, with a grinding sound, it opened. The two stood there, frightened.

“Oh, the stink!” said Diogenes, backing up and holding his nose.

And now Pendergast, deep within his mental construct, smelled it, too—an indescribable odor, foul, like a rotten, fungus-covered liver. He swallowed as the walls of the memory palace wavered, then came back into solidity.

Aloysius shone his candle into the freshly exposed space. It wasn’t a crypt at all, but rather a large storage room, set into the rear of the sub-basement. The flickering light played off an array of strange

contraptions made of brass, wood, and glass.

“What’s in there?” Diogenes said, creeping back up behind his brother.

“See for yourself.”

Diogenes peered in. “What are they?”

“Machines,” the older brother said positively, as if he knew.

“Are you going in?”

“Naturally.” Aloysius stepped through the doorway and turned. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I guess so.”

Pendergast, from the shadows, watched them go in.

The two boys stood in the room. The lead walls were streaked with whitish oxides. The space was packed floor-to-ceiling with contraptions: boxes painted with grimacing faces; old hats, ropes, and moth-eaten scarves; rusted chains and brass rings; cabinets, mirrors, capes, and wands. Cobwebs and thick layers of dust draped everything. At one end, propped up sideways, stood a sign, painted in garish colors and embellished with curlicues, a pair of pointing hands, and other nineteenth-century American carnival flourishes.

Late from the Great Halls of Europe

The Illustrious and Celebrated Mesmerist

Professor Comstock Pendergast

Presents

THE GRAND THEATRE AND ILLUMINATED PHANTASMAGORIA

Of

Magick, Illusion, and Prestidigitation

Pendergast stood in the shadows of his own memory, filled with the helpless foreboding of nightmare, watching the scene unfold. At first the two boys explored cautiously, their candlelight throwing elongated shadows among the boxes and piles of bizarre devices.

“Do you know what all this is?” whispered Aloysius.

“What?”

“We’ve found all the stuff from Great-Grand-Uncle Comstock’s magic show.”

“Who’s Great-Grand-Uncle Comstock?”

“Only the most famous magician in the history of the world. He trained Houdini himself.”

Aloysius touched a cabinet, ran his hand down to a knob, and cautiously pulled out a drawer: it contained a pair of manacles. He opened another drawer, which seemed to stick, and then it gave with a sudden pop! A pair of mice shot out of the drawer and scurried off.

Aloysius moved on to the next item, his younger brother following close behind. It was a coffin-like box standing upright, with a screaming man painted on the lid, numerous bloody holes piercing his body. He opened it with a groan of rusty hinges to reveal an interior studded with wrought-iron spikes.

“That looks more like torture than magic,” said Diogenes.

“There’s dried blood on those spikes.”

Diogenes peered closely, fear temporarily overcome by a strange eagerness. Then he stepped back again. “That’s just paint.”

“Are you sure?”

“I know dried blood when I see it.”

Aloysius moved on. “Look at that.” He pointed to an object in the far corner. It was a huge box, much larger than the others, rising from floor to ceiling, the size of a small room itself. It was garishly painted in red and gold with a grinning demon’s face on the front. Flanking the demon were odd things—a hand, a bloodshot eye, a finger—floating against the crimson background almost like severed body parts loosed in a tide of blood. Arched over a door cut into the side was a legend painted in gold and black:

The Doorway to Hell

“If it were my show,” said Aloysius, “I would have given it a much grander name, something more like ‘The Gates of the Inferno.’”

“The Doorway to Hell’ sounds boring.” He turned to Diogenes. “Your turn to go first.”

“How do you figure that?”

“I went first last time.”

“Then you can go first again.”

“No,” said Aloysius. “I don’t care to.” He put his hand on the door and gave Diogenes a nudge with his elbow.

“Don’t open it. Something might happen.”

Aloysius opened it to reveal a dim, stifling interior, lined with what looked like black velvet. A brass ladder stood just inside, disappearing up through a hatch in a low false ceiling set into the box.

“I could dare you to go in there,” Aloysius went on, “but I’m not going to. I don’t believe in childish games. If you want to go in, go in.”

“Why don’t you go in?”

“I freely admit it to you: I’m nervous.”

With a creeping feeling of shame, Pendergast could see his knack for psychological persuasion, already developed as a boy, coming into play. He wanted to see what was in there—but he wanted Diogenes to go in first.

“You’re scared?” Diogenes asked.

“That’s right. So the only way we’re ever going to know what’s in there is if you go in first. I’ll be right behind you, I promise.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Scared?”

“No.” The quaver in his high-pitched voice said otherwise.

Pendergast reflected bitterly that Diogenes, who was only seven, hadn’t yet learned that truth is the safest lie.

“Then what’s stopping you?”

“I... I don’t feel like it.”

Aloysius snickered dryly. "I admitted I was scared. If you're scared, say so, and we'll go back upstairs and forget all about it."

"I'm not scared. It's just some stupid fun house."

Pendergast watched, horrified, as his childish doppelganger reached over and grasped Diogenes by the shoulders. "Go ahead, then."

"Don't touch me!"

Firmly and gently, Aloysius urged him through the little doorway of the box and crowded in behind him, blocking his retreat. "As you said, it's just some stupid fun house."

"I don't want to stay in here."

They were both inside the first compartment in the box, jammed up against each other. Clearly, the fun house was meant to admit one adult at a time, not two half-grown children.

"Get going, brave Diogenes. I'll be right behind."

Wordlessly, Diogenes began to climb the little brass ladder, and Aloysius followed.

Pendergast watched them disappear as the hinged box door closed automatically behind them. His heart was beating so hard in his chest he thought it might explode at any moment. The walls of his memory construct flickered and shook. It was almost unbearable.

But he could not stop now. Something terrible was about to happen, but what exactly he still hadn't the slightest idea. He had not yet excavated that deeply into old, repressed memories. He had to keep going.

In his mind, he opened the box door and climbed the brass ladder himself, passing into a crawl space above, which turned horizontally and gave onto a low chamber above the false ceiling but below the top of the box. The two boys were there ahead of him, Diogenes in the lead. He was crawling toward a circular porthole in the far wall of the crawl space. Diogenes hesitated at the entrance to the porthole.

"Go on!" Aloysius urged.

The little boy glanced back once at his brother, a strange

expression in his eyes. Then he crawled through the porthole and disappeared.

Moving toward the porthole himself, Aloysius paused, peering round with the candle, apparently noticing for the first time that the walls seemed to be covered with photographs shellacked to the wood.

“Aren’t you coming?” came a small, scared, angry voice from the darkness beyond. “You promised you would stay right behind me.”

Pendergast, watching, felt himself begin to shake uncontrollably.

“Yes, yes. I’m coming.”

The young Aloysius crept up to the round, dark portal, looked inside—but went no farther.

“Hey! Where are you?” came the muffled cry from the darkness beyond. Then suddenly: “What’s happening? What’s this?” A shrill boyish scream cut through the little chamber like a scalpel. Ahead, through the porthole, Pendergast saw a light appear; saw the floor tip; saw Diogenes slide to the far end of a small room and tumble into a lighted pit below. There was a sudden low sound, like the rumble of an animal—and dreadful, unspeakable images appeared within the pit—and then with a swift thunk! the porthole snapped shut, blocking his view.

“No!” screamed Diogenes from deep within. “Nooooooooo!”

And then quite suddenly, Pendergast remembered all. It came rushing back in perfect, exquisite detail, every hideous second, every moment of the most terrifying experience in his life.

He remembered the Event.

As the memory crashed over him like a tidal wave, he felt his brain overload, his neurons shut down—and he lost control of the memory crossing. The mansion trembled, shivered, and exploded in his mind, the walls igniting and flying apart, a huge roar filling his head, the great palace of memory blazing off into the darkness of infinite space, dissolving into glittering shards of light like meteors streaking into the void. For a brief moment, the anguished cries of Diogenes continued from out of the limitless gulf—then they, too, fell away and all was quiet once again.

Chapter 51

Warden Gordon Imhof glanced around the table of the spartan conference room deep within Herkmoor's Command Block, microphone clipped to his lapel. All things considered, he felt good. The response to the breakout had been immediate and overwhelming. Everything had worked like clockwork, by the book: as soon as the Code Red was given, the entire complex had been electronically locked down, all ingress and egress halted. The escapees had run around for a time like headless chickens—theirs had been a totally senseless escape plan—and within forty minutes they had all been rounded up and put back either in their cells or in the infirmary. The obligatory anklet sensor check, which ran automatically every time a Code Red was suspended, confirmed that all prisoners in the complex were accounted for.

In the corrections business, Imhof mused, the way to get noticed was through a crisis. A crisis created visibility. Depending on how the crisis was handled, it created an advancement opportunity or a ruined career. This particular one had been handled flawlessly: a single guard hurt (and not badly at that), no hostages taken, nobody killed or seriously injured. Under his leadership, Herkmoor had retained its flawless no-escape record.

Imhof glanced at the clock, waited for the second hand to sweep around to exactly 7:30. Coffey hadn't shown up, but he wasn't going to wait. The truth was, the smug FBI agent and his lackey had really begun to get on his nerves.

"Gentlemen," he began, "let me start this meeting by saying to all of you: well done."

A murmuring and a vague shifting greeted this opening.

"Today, Herkmoor faced an extraordinary challenge—a mass escape attempt. At two-eleven P.M., nine inmates cut the fence in one of the building C exercise yards and fanned out through the inner perimeter fields. One got as far as the security station at the south end of building B. The cause of the breakout is still under investigation. Suffice to say, it appears that the prisoners in yard 4 were not under direct guard supervision at the time of the escape, for reasons that remain unclear."

He paused, giving the group around the table a stern look. “We will be addressing that failure in the course of this debriefing.”

Then he relaxed his features. “Overall, the response to the escape attempt was immediate and by the book. First responders were at the scene at two-fourteen and a Code Red was immediately sounded. More than fifty guards were mobilized for the response. In well under an hour, every single escapee had been recaptured and all prisoners had been accounted for. By three-oh-one, the Code Red had ended. Herkmoor returned to business as usual.”

He paused for a moment. “Once again, I offer my congratulations to all involved. Everyone can relax, this is merely a pro forma meeting—as you know, a formal debriefing is required by regulation to occur within twelve hours of any Code Red. I apologize for keeping you here past your normal workday: let’s see if we can’t tie up any loose ends quickly so we can all get home to dinner. I urge any of you with questions to ask them as we proceed. Do not stand on ceremony.”

He looked around the room. “I call first on building C security manager James Rollo. Jim, could you talk about the role of Officer Sidesky? There seems to be some confusion about that.”

A man with a pour-over belly arose with the sound of jingling keys, adjusted his belt with more jingling. His face had assumed a stolid look of high seriousness.

“Thank you, sir. As you mentioned, the Code Red was sounded at two-fourteen. The first responders came from guard station 7. Four responded, leaving Officer Sidesky to man the guard station. It appears one of the escapees overpowered Officer Sidesky, drugged him, tied him up, and left him in the nearby men’s room. He’s still disoriented, but as soon as he is lucid we’ll get a statement.”

“Very well.”

At this point, a restless-looking man in a nurse’s uniform rose. “I’m Staff Nurse Kidder, sir, in charge of the building B infirmary.”

Imhof looked at him. “Yes?”

“There seems to have been some kind of mix-up. Early in the escape attempt, the EMTs brought down an injured guard claiming to be Sidesky, in uniform with his badge and ID. He then disappeared.”

“That’s easily explained,” said Rollo. “We found Sidesky without

his uniform and badge. He must have left the infirmary. And then, evidently, one of the prisoners must have stripped Sidesky after knocking him out.”

“That sounds logical to me,” said Imhof. He hesitated. “Only thing is, all the escapees were apprehended in their prison garb. None were wearing uniforms.”

Rollo rubbed his wattle. “The prisoner who stripped Sidesky probably didn’t have time to put on the uniform.”

“That must be it,” said Imhof. “Mr. Rollo, please record those items as missing: uniform, badge, and ID belonging to Sidesky. I expect they’ll be found in the trash or in a dark corner somewhere. Can’t have them falling into prisoner hands.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mystery solved. Continue, Mr. Rollo.”

“Forgive me for interrupting,” said Kidder, “but I’m not sure the mystery is solved. This man claiming to be Sidesky was left in the infirmary awaiting the radiologist while I attended to some of the escapees. He had several broken ribs, contusions, a facial laceration, a —”

“We don’t need the complete diagnosis, Kidder.”

“Right, sir. Anyway, he was in no condition to go anywhere. And when I returned, Sidesky—I mean, the guy claiming to be Sidesky—had disappeared, and in his bed was the corpse of the prisoner, Carlos Lacarra.”

“Lacarra?” Imhof frowned. He hadn’t heard this part before.

“That’s right. Someone had moved his cadaver and stuck him in Sidesky’s bed.”

“Somebody’s idea of a joke?”

“I don’t know, sir. I was wondering if... well, if it could be involved with the escape attempt somehow.”

There was a silence.

“If so,” Imhof finally said, “then we’re dealing with a more sophisticated plan than we initially assumed. But the bottom line is

this: every single escapee was recaptured and is accounted for. We'll be interrogating them in the days ahead to unravel exactly what happened."

"One other thing troubles me," Kidder went on. "During the escape, a morgue-mobile arrived to take Lacarra's body away. It was kept waiting outside the gates until the Code Red came down."

"And?"

"When the code was called off, the ambulance came in and loaded the body. The chief physician witnessed the loading and signed the papers."

"I don't see the problem."

"The problem, sir, is that it wasn't until fifteen minutes later that I found Lacarra's body in Sidesky's bed."

Imhof raised his eyebrows. "So the wrong stiff got picked up in the confusion. That's understandable. Don't be too hard on yourself, Kidder. Just call the hospital and sort it out."

"I did that, sir. And when I called the hospital, they said our call to pick up the body this morning was canceled right after it came in. They swear they never even sent a morgue-mobile."

Imhof snorted. "That damn hospital is always screwing up, a dozen layers of administrators who don't know their ass from a hole in the ground. Call them back in the morning, tell them we sent them the wrong stiff and they should go look for it." He shook his head in disgust.

"But that's just the problem, sir. We didn't have any other corpse at Herkmoor. I can't figure out what cadaver went to the hospital."

"You say the chief physician signed the papers?"

"Yes. He went home at the end of his shift."

"We'll get a statement from him tomorrow. No doubt we'll straighten out this confusion in the morning. Anyway, it's tangential to the escape attempt. Let's get on with the debriefing."

Kidder fell silent, his face troubled.

"All right. The next question is why the yard seemed to have no

supervision at the time of the breakout. My time sheets show Fecteau and Doyle were on yard 4 duty at the time of the escape. Fecteau, could you please explain your absence?”

A very nervous guard at the far end of the table cleared his voice. “Yes, sir. Officer Doyle and I had yard duty that day—”

“The nine prisoners were escorted to the yard on schedule?”

“Yes, sir. They arrived at two P.M. sharp.”

“Where were you?”

“At our yard posts, just as required.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, about five minutes later, we got the call from Special Agent Coffey.”

“Coffey called you?” Imhof was truly astonished. This was way out of line. He glanced around: Coffey still hadn’t shown up.

“Tell us about the call, Fecteau.”

“He said he needed us right away. We explained we were on yard duty, but he insisted.”

Imhof felt his anger rising. Coffey had told him nothing about this. “Tell us Agent Coffey’s exact words, please.”

Fecteau hesitated, colored. “Well, sir, he said something like ‘If you’re not here in ninety seconds, I’ll have you transferred to North Dakota.’ Something like that, sir. I tried to explain that we were the only two on yard duty, but he cut me off.”

“He threatened you?”

“Basically, yes.”

“And so you left the yard unattended, without checking with either the chief of security or me?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I thought he must have authorized it with you.”

“Why in hell, Fecteau, would I authorize the removal of the only two guards on yard duty, leaving a gang of prisoners to their own

devices?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I assumed it was... because of the special prisoner.”

“The special prisoner? What are you talking about?”

“Well...” Fecteau had begun to stumble over his words. “The special prisoner who had exercise privileges in yard 4.”

“Yes, but he never made it to yard 4. He remained in his cell.”

“Um, no, sir. We saw him in yard 4.”

Imhof took a deep breath. Things were more screwed up than he had thought. “Fecteau, you’re getting confused. The prisoner remained in his cell all day and was never escorted to yard 4. I checked on it personally during the code—I have the electronic logs right here. The anklet scans show he never left solitary.”

“Well, sir, my best recollection is that the special prisoner was there.” He cast an inquiring glance toward the other guard, Doyle, who looked equally flummoxed.

“Doyle?” Imhof asked sharply.

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t ‘yes, sir’ me, I want to know: did you see the special prisoner in yard 4 today?”

“Yes, sir. I mean, that’s my recollection, sir.”

A long silence. Imhof screwed his eye around to Rollo, but the man was already murmuring into his radio. It took only moments for the security manager to put it aside and look up again. “According to the electronic monitor, the special prisoner’s still in his cell. Never left it.”

“Better send someone to do a cell check, just to make sure.” Imhof boiled with fury at Coffey. Where the hell was he? This was all his fault.

As if on cue, the door flew open and there was Special Agent Coffey, trailed by Rabiner.

“It’s about time,” said Imhof darkly.

“It certainly is about time,” said Coffey, striding into the room, face red. “I left specific orders for the special prisoner to be put into yard 4, and now I find out it was never done. Imhof, when I give an order, I expect it to be—”

Imhof rose. He’d had it with this asshole, and he wasn’t going to let him bully him, especially in front of his staff. “Agent Coffey,” he said in an icy voice, “we had a serious escape attempt today, as you surely know.”

“That’s no concern of—”

“We are conducting a debriefing related to said escape. You are interrupting. If you will sit down and await your turn to speak, we will continue.”

Coffey remained standing, looking at him, face turning red. “I don’t appreciate being addressed in that tone of voice.”

“Agent Coffey, I am asking you one more time to sit down and allow this debriefing to continue. If you continue to speak out of turn, I will have you removed from the premises.”

A thunderstruck silence ensued. Coffey’s face contorted with fury and he turned to Rabiner. “You know what? I think our presence at this meeting is no longer required.” He swiveled back to Imhof. “You’ll be hearing from me.”

“Your presence certainly is required. I have two guards here who say you gave them orders and threatened them with termination if they didn’t obey—despite the fact that you have absolutely no authority here. As a result, prisoners were left unattended and attempted escape. You, sir, are responsible for the escape attempt. I make this statement for the record.”

Another electric silence. Coffey looked around, the imperious look on his face softening as he began to absorb the seriousness of the accusation. His eyes locked on the tape recorder in the middle of the table, the microphones in front of each seat.

Stiffly Coffey sat down, swallowed. “I’m sure we can straighten out this, ah, misunderstanding, Mr. Imhof. There’s no need to make rash accusations.”

In the ensuing silence, Rollo’s radio chimed—he was receiving the callback about the cell check for the special prisoner. As Imhof

watched, the security manager lifted the radio to his ear and listened, his face gradually turning a slack, dead white.

Chapter 52

Glinn glanced down at Special Agent Pendergast. He lay unmoving on the couch of burgundy-colored leather, arms over his chest, ankles crossed. He had been like that for almost twenty minutes. With his unnaturally pale complexion and gaunt features, the man looked remarkably like a corpse. The only signs of life were the beads of sweat that had sprung out across Pendergast's forehead and a faint trembling in his hands.

His body jerked once, suddenly, then fell still. The eyes slowly opened—remarkably bloodshot, the pupils like pinpricks in the silvery irises.

Glinn wheeled forward, leaned close. Something had happened. The memory crossing was over.

"You stay. Alone," Pendergast said in a husky whisper. "Send Lieutenant D'Agosta and Dr. Krasner away."

Glinn closed the door quietly behind him, turned the lock. "Done."

"What is to come... must take the form of an interrogatory. You will ask questions. I will answer them. There is no other way. I..." And here the whisper stopped for a long moment. "I am unable to speak about what I have just witnessed—voluntarily."

"Understood."

Pendergast lay silent. After a moment, Glinn spoke again. "You have something to tell me."

"Yes."

"About your brother, Diogenes."

"Yes."

"The Event."

A pause. "Yes."

Glinn glanced at the ceiling, where a tiny camera and high-gain microphone were concealed. Reaching into his pocket, he pressed a small remote control, deactivating them. Some inner sense told him that whatever was to come should remain solely the province of their collective memory.

He inched his wheelchair forward. "You were there."

"Yes."

"You and your brother. No others."

"No others."

"What was the date?"

Another pause. "The date is not important."

"Let me decide that."

"It was spring. The bougainvillea was in bloom outside. Beyond that, I don't know."

"How old were you?"

"Nine."

"And your brother must have been seven, correct?"

"Yes."

"Location?"

"Maison de la Rochemore, our ancestral home on Dauphine Street, New Orleans."

"And what were you doing?"

"Exploring."

"Go on."

Pendergast was silent. Glinn remembered his words: You will ask questions. I will answer them.

He cleared his throat quietly. "Did you frequently explore the house?"

“It was a large mansion. It had many secrets.”

“How long had it been in the family?”

“It had originally been a monastery, but an ancestor purchased it in the 1750s.”

“And which ancestor was that?”

“Augustus Robespierre Pendergast. He spent decades refashioning it.”

Glinn knew most of this, of course. But it had seemed better to keep Pendergast talking for a bit—and answering the easy questions—before venturing deeper. Now he would penetrate.

“And where were you exploring on this particular day?” he asked.

“The sub-basements.”

“Were they one of the secrets?”

“My parents didn’t know we had found our way into them.”

“But you had discovered a way.”

“Diogenes did.”

“And he shared it with you.”

“No. I—followed him once.”

“That’s when he told you.”

A pause. “I made him tell me.”

The sweat was thicker on Pendergast’s brow now, and Glinn did not press this point. “Describe the sub-basements to me.”

“They were reached through a false wall in the basement.”

“And beyond, a staircase leading down?”

“Yes.”

“What was at the bottom of the staircase?”

Another pause. “A necropolis.”

Glinn paused a moment to master his surprise. “And you were exploring this necropolis?”

“Yes. We were reading inscriptions on the family tombs. That is how... how it started.”

“You found something?”

“The entrance to a secret chamber.”

“And what was inside?”

“The magical equipment of my ancestor, Comstock Pendergast.”

Glinn paused again. “Comstock Pendergast, the magician?”

“Yes.”

“So he stored his stage equipment in the sub-basement?”

“No. My family hid it there.”

“Why did they do that?”

“Because much of the equipment was dangerous.”

“But while you were exploring the room, you didn’t know that.”

“No. Not at first.”

“At first?”

“Some of the devices looked strange. Cruel. We were young, we didn’t fully understand...” Pendergast hesitated.

“What happened next?” Glinn asked gently.

“In the back, we found a large box.”

“Describe it.”

“Very large—almost the size of a small room itself—but portable. It was garish. Red and gold. The face of a demon was painted on its side. There were words above the face.”

“What did the words say?”

“‘The Doorway to Hell.’”

Pendergast was trembling slightly now, and Glinn let some more time pass before speaking again. "Did the box have an entrance?"

"Yes."

"And you went inside."

"Yes. No."

"You mean, Diogenes went first?"

"Yes."

"Willingly?"

Another long pause. "No."

"You goaded him," Glinn said.

"That, and..." Pendergast stopped once more.

"You used force?"

"Yes."

Glinn now kept utterly still. He did not allow even the slightest squeak of the wheelchair to break the tense atmosphere.

"Why?"

"He had been sarcastic, as usual. I was angry with him. If there was something a little frightening... I wanted him to go first."

"So Diogenes crawled inside. And you followed him."

"Yes."

"What did you find?"

Pendergast's mouth worked, but it was some time before the words emerged. "A ladder. Leading up to a crawl space above."

"Describe it."

"Dark. Stifling. Photographs on the walls."

"Go on."

“There was a porthole in the rear wall, leading into another room. Diogenes went first.”

Watching Pendergast, Glinn hesitated, then said, “You made him go first?”

“Yes.”

“And you followed.”

“I... I was about to.”

“What stopped you?”

Pendergast gave a sudden, spasmodic twitch, but did not answer.

“What stopped you?” Glinn pressed suddenly.

“The show began. Inside the box. Inside, where Diogenes was.”

“A show of Comstock’s devising?”

“Yes.”

“What was its purpose?”

Another twitch. “To frighten someone to death.”

Glinn leaned back slowly in his wheelchair. He had, as part of his research, studied Pendergast’s ancestry, and among his many colorful antecedents Comstock stood out. He had been the agent’s great-grand-uncle, in his youth a famed magician, mesmerist, and creator of illusions. As he grew old, however, he became increasingly bitter and misanthropic. Like so many of his relatives, he ended his days in an asylum.

So this was where Comstock’s madness had led.

“Tell me how it began,” he said.

“I don’t know. The floor tilted or collapsed beneath Diogenes. He fell into a lower chamber.”

“Deeper into the box?”

“Yes, back down to the first level. That was where the... show took place.”

“Describe it,” Glinn said.

Suddenly Pendergast moaned—a moan of such anguish, such long-repressed suffering, that Glinn was for a moment left speechless.

“Describe it,” he urged again as soon as he could speak.

“I only had a glimpse, I didn’t really see it. And then... they closed around me.”

“They?”

“Mechanisms. Driven by secret springs. One behind me, shutting off escape. Another that locked Diogenes inside the inner chamber.”

Pendergast fell silent again. The pillow beneath his head was now soaked in perspiration.

“But for a moment... you saw what Diogenes saw.”

Pendergast lay still. Then—very slowly—he inclined his head. “Only for a moment. But I heard it all. All of it.”

“What was it?”

“A magic-lantern show,” Pendergast whispered. “A phantasmagoria. Operated by voltaic cell. It was... Comstock’s specialty.”

Glinn nodded. He knew something of this. Magic-lanterns were devices that passed light through sheets of glass onto which images had been etched. Projected onto a slowly rotating wall with uneven surfaces to reinforce the illusion, and supplemented by sinister music and repetitious voices, it was the nineteenth-century equivalent of the horror movie.

“Well then, what did you see?”

Abruptly the agent leaped from the couch, suddenly full of feverish action. He paced the room, hands clenching and unclenching. Then he turned toward Glinn. “I beg you, do not ask me that.”

He mastered himself with a supreme effort, still pacing the room like a caged beast.

“Go on, please,” said Glinn tonelessly.

“Diogenes shrieked and screamed from within the inner chamber. Again and again... and again. I heard a terrible scrabbling as he tried to claw his way out—I could hear his nails breaking. Then there was a long silence... And then—I don’t know how much later—I heard the shot.”

“Gunshot?”

“Comstock Pendergast had furnished his... house of pain with a single-shot derringer. He gave his victim a choice. You could go mad; you could die of fright—or you could take your life.”

“And Diogenes chose the last.”

“Yes. But the bullet didn’t... didn’t kill him. It only damaged him.”

“How did your parents react?”

“At first they said nothing. Then they pretended Diogenes was sick, scarlet fever. They kept it secret. They were afraid of the scandal. They told me the fever had altered his vision, his sense of taste and smell. That it deadened one eye. But now I know it must have been the bullet.”

Glinn felt a chill horror settle over him, and he felt an illogical need to wash his hands. The thought of something so awful, so utterly terrifying, that a seven-year-old could possibly be induced to... He forced the thought away.

“And the small chamber you were imprisoned in,” he said. “These photographs you mention—what were they of?”

“Official crime scene photographs and police sketches of the world’s most terrible murders. Perhaps a way to prepare for the... the horror beyond.”

An awful silence settled over the small room.

“And how long was it before you were rescued?” Glinn asked at last.

“I don’t know. Hours, a day perhaps.”

“And you awakened from this living nightmare under the impression Diogenes had become sick. And that accounted for his long

absence.”

“Yes.”

“You had no idea of the truth.”

“No, none.”

“And yet Diogenes never realized that you had repressed the memory.”

Abruptly Pendergast stopped in his pacing. “No. I suppose he didn’t.”

“As a result, you never apologized to your brother, tried to make it up to him. You never even mentioned it, because you had utterly blocked out all memory of the Event.”

Pendergast looked away.

“But to Diogenes, your silence meant something else entirely. A stubborn refusal to admit your mistake, to ask forgiveness. And that would explain...”

Glinn fell silent. Slowly he pushed his wheelchair back. He did not know everything—that would await the computer analysis—but he knew enough to see it now, clearly, in its broadest brushstrokes. Almost from birth, Diogenes had been a strange, dark, and brilliant creature, as had many Pendergasts before him. He might have swung either way, if the Event had not occurred. But the person who emerged from the Doorway to Hell—ravaged emotionally as well as physically—had turned into something else entirely. Yes, it all made sense: the gruesome images of crime, of murder, that Pendergast had endured... Diogenes’s hatred of the brother who refused to speak of the ordeal he had caused... Pendergast’s own unnatural attraction to pathological crimes... Both brothers now made sense. And Glinn now knew why Pendergast had repressed the memory so utterly. It was not simply because it was so awful. No—it was because the guilt was so overwhelming it threatened his very sanity.

Remotely, Glinn became aware that Pendergast was looking at him. The agent was standing as stiff as a statue, his skin like gray marble.

“Mr. Glinn,” he said.

Glinn raised his eyebrows in silent query.

“There is nothing more I can or will say.”

“Understood.”

“I will now require five minutes alone, please. Without interruptions of any kind. And then we can... proceed.”

After a moment, Glinn nodded. Then he turned the wheelchair around, opened the door, and exited the studio without another word.

Chapter 53

With sirens shrieking, Hayward was able to get down to Greenwich Village in twenty minutes. On the way, she had tried the few other contact numbers she had for D'Agosta—none connected. She had tried to find a listing for Effective Engineering Solutions or Eli Glinn, without success. Even the NYPD telephone and Manhattan business databases didn't have a number, although EES was registered as a legitimate business, as required by law.

She knew the company existed, and she knew its address on Little West 12th Street. Beyond that, nothing.

Sirens still blaring, she pulled off the West Side Highway onto West Street, and from there turned into a narrow lane, crowded on both sides by dingy brick buildings. She shut off her sirens and crawled along, glancing at the building numbers. Little West 12th, once the center of the meatpacking district, was a single block in length. The EES building had no number, but she deduced it must be the correct one by the numbers on either side. It was not exactly what she imagined: perhaps a dozen stories tall, with the faded name of some long-defunct meatpacking company on the side—except it betrayed itself by tiers of expensive new windows on the upper floors and a pair of metal doors at the loading dock that looked suspiciously high-tech. She double-parked in front, blocking the narrow street, and went up to the entrance.

A smaller door sat beside the loading dock, an intercom with a buzzer its only adornment. She pressed the intercom and waited, her heart racing with frustration and impatience.

Almost immediately a female voice answered. "Yes?"

She flashed her badge, not sure where the camera was but certain there was one. "Captain Laura Hayward, NYPD Homicide. I demand immediate access to these premises."

"Do you have a warrant?" came the pleasant answer.

"No. I'm here to see Lieutenant Vincent D'Agosta. I've got to see him immediately—it's a matter of life and death."

“We don’t have a Vincent D’Agosta on staff here,” came the female voice, still maintaining a tone of bureaucratic pleasantness.

Hayward took a breath. “I want you to carry a message to Eli Glinn. If this door isn’t opened within thirty seconds, here’s what’ll happen: the NYPD will stake out the entrance, we’ll photograph everyone coming in or out, and we’ll get a search warrant looking for a meth lab and bust a lot of glass. You understand me? The countdown just began.”

It took only fifteen seconds. There came a faint click and the doors sprang open noiselessly.

She stepped into a dimly lit corridor that ended in doors of polished stainless steel. They opened simultaneously, revealing a heavily muscled man in a warm-up suit emblazoned with the logo of Harvey Mudd College. “This way,” he said, and turned unceremoniously.

She followed him through a cavernous room to an industrial elevator, which led via a short ascent to a maze of white corridors, finally ending up at a pair of polished cherry doors. They opened onto a small, elegant conference room.

Standing at the far end was Vincent D’Agosta.

“Hi, Laura,” he managed after a moment.

Hayward suddenly found herself at a loss for words. She’d been so intent on getting to see him that she hadn’t thought ahead to what she would say if she succeeded. D’Agosta, too, was silent. It seemed that beyond a greeting, he was also unable to speak.

Hayward swallowed, found her voice. “Vincent, I need your help.”

Another long silence. “My help?”

“At our last meeting, you spoke about Diogenes planning something bigger. You said, ‘He’s got a plan which he’s put in motion.’”

Silence. Hayward found herself coloring; this was a lot harder than she’d thought. “That plan is tonight,” she went on. “At the museum. At the opening.”

“How do you know?”

“Let’s call it a gut feeling—a pretty damn strong gut feeling.”

D’Agosta nodded.

“I think Diogenes works at the museum, in some kind of alter ego. All the evidence shows the diamond theft had inside help, right? Well, he was the inside help.”

“That isn’t what you and Coffey and all the others concluded—”

She waved her hand impatiently. “You said Viola Maskelene and Pendergast were romantically involved. That’s why Diogenes kidnapped her. Right?”

“Right.”

“Guess who’s at the opening.”

Another silence—this one not awkward, but surprised.

“That’s right. Maskelene. Hired at the last minute to be Egyptologist for the show. To replace Wicherly, who died in the museum under very strange circumstances.”

“Oh, Jesus.” D’Agosta glanced at his watch. “It’s seven-thirty.”

“The opening’s going on as we speak. We need to go right now.”

“I—” D’Agosta hesitated again.

“Come on, Vinnie, there’s no time to waste. You know the place better than I do. The brass isn’t going to do anything—I have to do it myself. That’s why I need you there.”

“You need more than me,” he said, his voice now quiet.

“Who else did you have in mind?”

“You need Pendergast.”

Hayward laughed mirthlessly. “Brilliant. Let’s send a chopper up to Herkmoor and see if we can’t borrow him for the evening.”

Another silence. “He isn’t at Herkmoor. He’s here.”

Hayward stared at him, uncomprehending.

“Here?” she repeated at last.

D’Agosta nodded.

“You busted him out of Herkmoor?”

Another nod.

“My God, Vinnie. Are you frigging crazy? You’re already hip-deep in shit... and now this?” Without thinking, she sank into one of the chairs at the conference table, then sprang immediately back to her feet. “I can’t believe it.”

“What are you going to do about it?” D’Agosta asked.

Hayward stood there, staring at him. Slowly the enormity of the choice she had to make became clear to her. It was a choice between playing it by the book—taking Pendergast into custody, calling in backup and transferring custody, then getting back to the museum—or...

Or what? There was no other option. That was what she should do—what she had to do. Everything she had learned as a cop, every fiber of her cop’s soul, told her so.

She took out her radio.

“Calling for backup?” D’Agosta asked in a low voice.

She nodded.

“Think about what you’re about to do, Laura. Please.”

But fifteen years of training had already thought for her. She raised the radio to her lips. “This is Captain Hayward calling Homicide One, come in.”

She felt D’Agosta’s hand gently touch her shoulder. “You need him.”

“Homicide One? This is a Code 16. I’ve got a fugitive and need backup...” Her voice trailed off.

In the silence, she could hear the dispatcher’s inevitable question. “Your location, Captain?”

Hayward said nothing. Her eyes met D'Agosta's.

"Captain? I need your location."

There was a silence broken only by the crackle of the radio.

"I read you, over," Hayward said.

"Your location?"

Another silence. Then she said, "Cancel that Code 16. Situation resolved. This is Captain Hayward, over and out."

Chapter 54

Hayward tore away from the curb, made a U-turn, and drove the wrong way down Little West 12th, peeled right onto West Street, and rocketed uptown, cars braking and pulling off to the left and right as she flashed past, sirens screaming. If all went well, they would be at the museum no later than 8:20 P.M. D'Agosta sat in the passenger's seat next to her, saying nothing. She glanced at Pendergast in the rearview mirror—face badly bruised, a freshly dressed cut along one cheek. He wore a ghostly expression, one she had never seen on his face before—or anybody else's, for that matter. He had the look of somebody who had just peered into his own personal hell.

Hayward returned her gaze to the street ahead. She knew, in some profound way, that she had just crossed the Rubicon. She had done something that went against all her training, everything she knew about what it meant to be a good cop.

Funny how, at the moment, she didn't seem to care.

A strange, uncomfortable silence hung over the three. She would have expected Pendergast to be peppering her with questions, or at least thanking her for not turning him in. Instead, he sat there wordlessly, the same awful expression on his bruised features.

"Okay," she said. "Here it is. Tonight's the big opening of the new exhibition at the museum. Everyone's there: top museum brass, mayor, governor, celebrities, tycoons. Everyone. I tried to stop it, postpone it, but I got vetoed. Problem is, I didn't—still don't—have any really hard information. All I know is this: something's coming down. And your brother, Diogenes, is behind it."

She glanced at Pendergast again. But he did not respond, did not return the glance. He just sat there, withdrawn, detached. He might have been a million miles away.

The wheels squealed a little as she negotiated a city bus, then accelerated onto the West Side Highway.

"After the diamond heist," she went on, "Diogenes vanished. I figure he already had an alter ego prepared and just stepped into it. I've done some sniffing around, and so has that journalist Smithback.

We're both convinced Diogenes's alter ego is a staff member of the museum, probably a curator. Think about it: the diamond heist had to be an inside job, but he's not the kind of guy to take in partners. That's also how he managed to penetrate the security of the Sacred Images exhibition and attack Margo Green. Vinnie, you'd told me from the start Diogenes was working up to something big. You were right all along. And it's going to happen tonight, at the opening."

"You'd better bring Pendergast up to speed on the new exhibition," D'Agosta said.

"After the fiasco with the diamonds, the museum announced it was going to reopen an old Egyptian tomb in its basement—the Tomb of Senef. Some French count gave them a ton of money to do it. It was obviously a way to distract public attention from the destruction of the diamond collection. Tonight's the opening gala."

"Name?" Pendergast asked. His voice was barely audible, as if emerging from deep within a sepulcher.

It was the first word Hayward had heard him utter. "I'm sorry?" she replied.

"The name of the count?"

"Thierry de Cahors."

"Did anyone actually meet this count?"

"I wouldn't know."

When Pendergast lapsed back into silence, she continued. "Over the past six weeks, there've been two deaths associated with the reopening of the tomb, supposedly unconnected with each other. The first was a computer technician working inside the tomb, killed by his partner. The guy went crazy, murdered his pal, stuffed his organs into nearby ceremonial jars, and fled to the museum attics. Attacked a guard when they tried to flush him out. The second death was a curator named Wicherly, a Brit brought in specially to curate the show. He went nuts, tried to strangle Nora Kelly—you know her, Vinnie, right?"

"She all right?"

"She's fine—in fact, she's handling the opening tonight. Wicherly, on the other hand, was shot and killed by a panicked museum guard

during the attack on Kelly. Now here's the kicker: autopsies showed both aggressors suffered the exact same kind of brain damage."

D'Agosta looked over at her. "What?"

"Both were working in the tomb just before they went psycho. But we went over everything with a fine-tooth comb, found nothing—no environmental or other cause. As I said, the official line is that the two deaths are unconnected. But I'm not buying the coincidence. Diogenes is planning something—I've felt it all evening. And when I saw her at the opening, I knew I was right."

"Who?" Pendergast murmured.

"Viola Maskelene."

Hayward sensed a sudden stillness behind her.

"Did you inquire as to how she happened to be there?" came the very cool voice from the backseat.

Hayward swerved around a lumbering garbage truck. "She was hired by the museum at the last minute to replace Wicherly."

"Hired by whom?"

"The head of the Anthropology Department. Menzies. Hugo Menzies."

Another pause, much briefer, before Pendergast spoke again. "Tell me, Captain, what's the program for this evening?"

Pendergast seemed, in a way, to be waking up.

"Hors d'oeuvres and cocktails, seven to eight. The ribbon cutting and opening of the tomb, eight to nine. Dinner at nine-thirty."

"Opening of the tomb—I assume that includes a tour?"

"A tour with a sound-and-light show. Nationally televised."

"A sound-and-light show?"

"Yes."

Pendergast's voice—which had been so hollow and remote—was now laced with urgency. "For God's sake, Captain, hurry!"

Hayward shot between two cabs that were stubbornly refusing to let her pass, clipping one bumper in the process. Glancing in the rearview mirror, she saw it fly upward, bouncing and flipping in a shower of sparks.

“What am I missing here?” D’Agosta asked.

“Captain Hayward is right,” Pendergast said. “This is it—the ‘perfect crime’ Diogenes boasted about.”

“Are you sure?”

“Listen carefully,” Pendergast said. He hesitated briefly. “I will only speak of this once. A wrong was done to my brother, many years ago. He was exposed—inadvertently, but exposed nevertheless—to a sadistic device. It was a ‘house of pain,’ its sole purpose to drive its victim insane or kill him from sheer fright. And now Diogenes—in the person of Menzies, whom he is no doubt posing as—will, through some hidden means of his own, re-create this at the opening tonight. Eli Glinn said it: Diogenes is motivated by a feeling of victimization. My brother wants to perpetrate the wrong done to him, but on a large scale. And, with a live television broadcast, the scale could be large indeed. This is what he has been building up to. All the rest was merely sideshow.”

He sank back in the rear seat and fell silent once again.

The car careened off the West Side Highway at the 79th Street exit ramp, then accelerated eastward toward the rear of the museum. In the distance ahead, all seemed calm—there were no flashing police lights, no hovering helicopters.

Maybe it hasn’t happened yet.

She tore right on Columbus, made the dogleg around 77th Street with a screeching of rubber, and flew onto Museum Drive, jamming on her brakes before a crush of idling limousines, taxis, and spectators. The squad car slewed sideways before the crowd and she leaped out, waving her badge, D’Agosta already in the lead, a one-man flying wedge.

“Captain Hayward, NYPD Homicide!” she cried. “Make way!”

The crowds parted in confusion, the slower ones scattered by D’Agosta, and in a moment they were at the velvet ropes. Without even pausing, D’Agosta knocked down a guard who had stepped in

front of them. Hayward flashed her shield at the astonished police officers on duty and they sprinted up the carpeted steps toward the huge bronze doors of the museum.

Chapter 55

Nora Kelly stepped down from the podium into a sea of applause, enormously relieved that her short speech had gone well. She had been the last speaker, directly following George Ashton, the mayor, and Viola Maskelene, and now the main event was about to begin: the cutting of the ribbon and the opening of the Tomb of Senef.

Viola joined up with her. “Brilliant speech,” she said. “You were actually interesting.”

“As were you.”

She saw Hugo Menzies gesturing for them to come over. She pushed through the crowd, Viola following. Menzies’s face was florid, his blue eyes sparkling, his white tie and tails giving him the air of an impresario. His arm was linked with that of the mayor of New York, Simon Schuyler, a balding, owlsh man with spectacles, whose appearance belied an interior of slick and utterly lethal political genius. He was scheduled to give a short speech at dinner, and he looked the part. He was standing next to a brunet who was so well put together she could only have been a politician’s wife.

“Nora, my dear, you know Mayor Schuyler, of course,” Menzies said. “And this is Mrs. Schuyler. Simon, this is Dr. Nora Kelly, head curator of the Tomb of Senef and one of our most brilliant and interesting young scientists. And this is Dr. Viola Maskelene, the formidable British Egyptologist.”

“I’m delighted to meet you,” said Schuyler, eyeing Viola with interest through his thick lenses, then transferring that interest to Nora and back again, highly approving. “Marvelous talk you gave, Ms. Maskelene, especially that part about weighing the heart after death. I’m dreadfully afraid my heart has gotten rather heavy these last few years, thanks to New York City politics.” He laughed merrily and Nora and Viola dutifully laughed along with him, joined by Menzies. Schuyler was known for his huge appreciation of his own wit, an appreciation not shared by many of his acquaintances. Tonight he seemed in high good humor. Funny how, just six weeks ago, he’d been calling for Collopy’s resignation. So it was in big-city politics.

“Nora,” said Menzies, “the mayor and his wife would love to have

you and Dr. Maskelene accompany them in the tomb.”

“Delighted,” said Viola, smiling.

Nora nodded. “It would be our pleasure.” It was standard museum practice, she knew, for VIP guests at openings to get museum staff as private tour guides. And while Mayor Schuyler was not the highest-ranking politician at the opening, he was the most important, holder of the museum’s purse strings, who had been loudest in decrying the destruction of the diamonds.

“Yes, how lovely,” said his wife, who seemed less than enthusiastic about being escorted by two such attractive guides.

Menzies bustled off. Nora watched as he paired up the governor with the museum’s associate director, a New York senator with George Ashton, and various VIPs with other staff to ensure that everyone felt special.

“That fellow’s a regular matchmaker,” said the mayor, following him with his eyes, chuckling. “I could use him on my staff.” The hall’s warm overhead lighting shone off his bald pate, illuminating it like a billiard ball.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention!” came the rich, aristocratic voice of Frederick Watson Collopy, the museum’s director, who had positioned himself in front of the tomb doors, wielding the same tiresome pair of gigantic scissors that were trotted out at every opening. With a little help from an assistant, he got them positioned and ready to cut.

The tympanist in the small orchestra let fly a tolerable drumroll.

“I hereby officially reopen, after more than half a century of darkness, the Grand Tomb of Senef!”

With a mighty heave, Collopy shut the scissors, and the two ends of the cut ribbon fluttered to the floor. With a rumble, the faux stone doors slid open. The orchestra immediately sounded the famous theme of *Aïda* once again and those in the crowd with passes to the first of the two shows surged toward the dimly lit rectangle of darkness.

The mayor’s wife shivered. “I don’t like tombs. Is it really three thousand years old?”

“Three thousand three hundred and eighty,” said Viola.

"My goodness, you know so much!" said Mrs. Schuyler, turning to her.

"We Egyptologists are veritable founts of useless knowledge."

The mayor chuckled at this.

"Is it true what they say, that it's cursed?" Mrs. Schuyler went on.

"In a manner of speaking," said Viola. "Many Egyptian tombs had inscriptions that threatened harm to those who disturbed them. This one has a stronger curse than most—but that's probably because Senef wasn't a pharaoh."

"Oh, dear, I hope nothing happens to us. Who was this Senef?"

"They don't really know—probably the uncle of Thutmose IV. Thutmose became pharaoh at age six, and Senef acted as regent while Thutmose grew up."

"Thutmose? You mean King Tut?"

"Oh, no," said Viola. "Tut was Tutankhamen, another pharaoh—far less important than Thutmose."

"I get so confused," said the wife.

They passed through the doors, into the sloping corridor.

"Watch your step, dear," said the mayor.

"This is the God's First Passage," said Viola, and launched into a brief description of the tomb's layout. As she listened, Nora recalled the enthusiastic tour Wicherly had given only a few weeks before. Despite the warmth, she shivered.

They moved forward slowly toward the first stop on the sound-and-light show, hemmed in on all sides by the crowd. In a few minutes, the three hundred guests were all inside and she heard the rumble as the tomb doors closed, ending with a hollow clang. A sudden silence fell on the crowd and the lights dimmed even further.

Out of the darkness came the faint sound of a shovel digging in sand. Then another—and then a chorus of picks, all striking the soil. Then came the furtive voices of the tomb robbers, speaking in tense, muffled tones. Nora glanced over and saw, in the far corner, the PBS camera crew filming.

The sound-and-light show had begun, and millions were watching.

Chapter 56

Hayward arrived in the hall just behind D'Agosta, stepping into a blaze of light and color. To her dismay, she saw that the doors to the Tomb of Senef were closed, the decorative red ribbon lying cut on the floor. The most important guests were already inside, while the others were scattered about the hall, seated at cocktail tables or clustered in knots by the food and liquor.

"We've got to get those doors open—now," said Pendergast, coming up beside her.

"The computer control room is this way."

They ran across the hall—receiving startled glances from some of the guests—and burst through a door at the far end.

The computer control room for the Tomb of Senef was small. At one end was a long table on which stood several computer monitors and keyboards. On either side rose up racks of equipment: hard drives, controllers, synthesizers, video equipment. A muted television was tuned to the local PBS affiliate, currently simulcasting the opening. Two technicians sat at the table, observing a brace of monitors displaying video feeds from inside the tomb, as well as a third monitor, on which scrolled a long series of numbers. They turned, surprised at the sudden entry.

"What's the status of the sound-and-light show?" Hayward asked.

"Going like clockwork," said one of the technicians. "Why?"

"Shut it down," Hayward said. "Open the tomb doors."

The technician removed a pair of earphones. "I can't do that without authorization."

Hayward stuck her badge in his face. "Captain Hayward, NYPD Homicide. How's that?"

The technician hesitated, staring at the badge. Then he shrugged and turned to the other. "Larry, initiate the door release sequence, please."

Hayward glanced at the second technician and noted it was Larry Enderby, a staff member she had questioned about the attempted murder of Margo Green, and again about the diamond theft. He seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time a lot these days.

“If you say so,” Enderby said a little dubiously.

He had just begun to type when Manetti charged in, his face red, followed by two guards.

“What’s going on?” he said.

“We’ve got a problem,” said Hayward. “We’re stopping the show.”

“You aren’t stopping anything without a damn good reason.”

“No time to explain.”

Enderby had paused in his typing, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, looking from Hayward to Manetti and back.

“I’ve been as accommodating as I can, Captain Hayward,” Manetti said. “But now you’ve gone too far. This opening is critical to the museum. Everyone who counts is here and we’ve got a live audience of millions. No way am I going to allow anything or anybody to disrupt that.”

“Stand down, Manetti,” Hayward said in a clipped voice. “I’ll take full responsibility. Something is about to go terribly wrong.”

“No go, Captain,” Manetti said brusquely. He gestured at the television. “See for yourself. Everything’s fine.” He reached over and turned up the sound:

In the fifth year of the reign of the pharaoh Thutmosis IV...

Hayward turned back to Enderby. “Open those doors now.”

“Hold off on that order, Enderby,” Manetti said.

The technician’s hands, still poised above the keyboard, began to tremble.

Manetti glanced past Hayward and abruptly caught sight of Pendergast. “What the hell? Aren’t you supposed to be in prison?”

“I said, open the goddamn doors,” Hayward barked.

“Something’s not right.” Manetti began to fumble for his radio.

Pendergast moved smoothly forward. He turned his bruised face to Manetti and said in a courteous voice, “My sincerest apologies.”

“What for?”

The blow came so fast that it was little more than a blur, and with a muffled oof! Manetti doubled over. With a smooth, swift gesture, Pendergast whisked Manetti’s sidearm out of its holster and pointed it at the two guards.

“Weapons, batons, pepper spray, radios, on the floor,” he said.

The two guards obeyed.

Pendergast plucked one of their guns from its holster and handed it to D’Agosta. “Watch them.”

“Right.”

Pendergast took the second guard’s gun and tucked it in his waistband as a spare. Then he turned back to Manetti, who was on his knees, one hand cradling his midriff, trying to suck in air.

“I am truly sorry. There’s a conspiracy under way to destroy everybody in the tomb. We’re going to try to stop it, whether you like it or not. Now: where is Hugo Menzies?”

“You’re in big trouble, pal,” Manetti gasped. “Even bigger than you were before.” And he began to rise.

D’Agosta raised the gun threateningly, and Manetti froze. “Menzies is in the tomb with the rest,” he said after a moment.

Pendergast turned to the technicians and spoke, his voice icy and laced with menace. “Mr. Enderby? You heard the order: open the doors.”

The technician, thoroughly frightened, nodded and began to type on the keyboard. “No problem, sir, I’ll have them open in a jiffy.”

A momentary silence.

Another staccato bunch of keystrokes, then another pause. Enderby frowned.

“Seems we got a glitch here...”

Chapter 57

In the fifth year of the reign of the pharaoh Thutmosis IV, Senef—the grand vizier and former regent to the young pharaoh—died of unknown causes. He was buried in a grand tomb in the Valley of the Kings that had been under construction for twelve years. Although Senef had never been a pharaoh himself, he was buried in the Valley of the Kings as befitted one who acted as regent to a pharaoh and who probably retained pharaonic-like power after the assumption to the throne of his former ward. The Great Tomb of Senef was filled with all the riches ancient Egypt could provide: grave goods in gold and silver, lapis, carnelian, alabaster, onyx, granite, and adamant, as well as furniture, foodstuffs, statues, chariots, games, and weapons. No expense was spared.

In the tenth year of his reign, Thutmosis fell ill. His son, Amenhotep III, was declared pharaoh by a faction of the army, opposed by the priesthood. There was a rebellion in Upper Egypt, and the Land of the Two Kingdoms fell into strife and chaos.

It was a good time to rob a tomb.

And so, one morning at dawn, the high priests assigned to guard the Great Tomb of Senef began to dig...

The voice-over paused. Nora stood in the darkened corridor of the God's Second Passage, shoulder-to-shoulder with the mayor and his wife. Viola Maskelene stood just beyond them. The sounds of digging grew louder, the chuff-chuff of the shovels rising in crescendo with the excited voices of the tomb robbers. A muffled cheer, the scraping of shovel on stone, and then the sharp crack of plaster seals being struck off with a pick, one by one. All around her, the audience—three hundred handpicked VIPs, the movers and shakers of New York—watched, enthralled.

As the show continued, there was a rumble and grinding of stone: the robbers were dragging aside the outer tomb door. A crack of light appeared, throwing a brilliant beam into the dim space. A moment later, the digitized faces of the tomb robbers appeared, eagerly scurrying in and lighting torches. They were dressed in the garb of ancient Egyptians. Although Nora had seen this all before, she was still amazed at how realistic the holographic robbers looked.

A new set of projectors took over seamlessly, throwing images onto artfully placed screens, and the tomb robbers appeared to creep fearfully along the passageway ahead of the visitors. With gestures and hisses, the ghostly robbers turned and urged the audience to follow along behind them—including them as accomplices. This helped assure that the crowd would now move on to the next stage of the sound-and-light show—which took place in the Hall of the Chariots.

As she moved with the crowd, Nora felt a shiver of pride. It was an excellent script—Wicherly had done a masterful job. For all his personal failings, he had been abundantly talented. She was also proud of her own creative contribution. Hugo Menzies had guided the overall project with a subtle and sure hand, while proving equally clever with the nuts and bolts of bringing the show together. The technicians and A/V crew had done a splendid job with the visuals. Judging from the mesmerized audience, so far it was going very well.

As the crowd walked down the corridor toward the well, following the video images of the tomb robbers, lights placed behind hidden panels flickered, simulating the effect of torchlight on the walls. The crowd flow was working perfectly, the audience automatically moving at the pace of the robbers.

At the well, the robbers paused, their voices raised in discussion of how to bridge the dangerous pit. Several of them carried thin tree trunks over their shoulders, which they proceeded to lash together. Using a crude pulley and winch system, they lowered the logs and swung them across the well to make a bridge. The projected images then inched across the swaying, creaking bridge as if on a tightrope. A cry rang out as one of the figures slipped from the bridge, plunging with a hideous scream into the darkness of the pit—cut off suddenly in a sickening smack of meat hitting stone. The audience gasped.

“Goodness,” said the mayor’s wife. “That was rather... realistic.”

Nora glanced around. Initially, she had been against that little piece of drama, but she had to admit that—judging by the excited murmurs and gasps of the audience—it had been effective. Even the mayor’s wife, despite her faint objection, seemed enthralled.

More invisible holographic screens now descended as others rose, and the computer-controlled video projectors seamlessly transferred the images of the robbers from one screen to the next, giving them the illusion of three-dimensional motion. The effect was extraordinarily

real. And yet—the moment the last visitor left the tomb—the screens would all retract and the images of death and destruction would be cut off, leaving the hall in its original pristine shape and ready for the next performance.

The guests followed the holographic figures into the Hall of the Chariots. Here, the robbers fanned out, awestruck at the incredible wealth spread out before them—heaped-up gold and silver, lapis, and gemstones, all gleaming dully by torchlight. The audience itself was halted by a lowered barrier at the far end of the hall, and the second section of the show began with another voice-over:

The Tomb of Senef, like many ancient Egyptian tombs, contained an inscription that cursed those who would despoil it. But an even greater deterrent than a curse was the robbers' own terror of the power of the pharaoh. For these high priests, although greedy and corrupt, were also believers. They believed in the divinity of the pharaoh and in his everlasting life. They believed in the magical properties which had been invested in the objects buried in the tomb with him. The magic in these objects was extremely dangerous and would do the robbers great harm if it were not canceled.

For this reason, the first thing the robbers did was destroy all the grave goods in the tomb, as a way to expunge their magical powers.

The robbers, having recovered from their initial awe, began to pick up objects and hurl them about—tentatively at first, then working up to an orgy of destruction, smashing furniture, vases, armor, and statues, hurling them against the walls, dashing them onto the stone floors, or swinging them into square pillars, sending ghostly projections of gemstones, gold, and fragments of alabaster skittering and rattling everywhere. They screamed and cursed as they worked. Other robbers scrambled about on their hands and knees, sorting through the destruction for things of value and stuffing them into sacks.

Once again, the illusion was remarkable.

Everything would be destroyed. The only things of value taken from the tomb would be taken in pieces and further reduced as soon as possible. Metals would be melted down into bullion; jewels, inlaid lapis, turquoise, and jasper would be pried from their settings and recut. All this treasure would then be quickly exported from Egypt, where any residual power of the godlike pharaoh still residing in the objects would be lost.

That would be the fate of all the beautiful and precious objects in the tomb—total annihilation. The work of thousands of craftsmen over years, reduced in a single day to broken shards.

The frenzy of cursing, screaming, and destruction grew. Nora glanced at the mayor and his wife; both were staring at the scene, mouths open, astonished and utterly captivated. It was the same for the rest of the crowd. Even the police officers and the camera crew looked spellbound. Viola Maskelene caught her eye. The Egyptologist nodded and gave her a thumbs-up.

Nora shivered once again. The Tomb of Senef was going to be a success—a huge success. And—she couldn't help but think—she was the chief curator of the tomb. This was to her credit. Menzies had been right: this would make her career.

The voice-over resumed:

And now, having destroyed the Hall of the Chariots and gleaned all treasure of value, the robbers moved into the deepest section of the tomb: the so-called House of Gold, the burial chamber itself. This was the richest—and most dangerous—part of the tomb. Because here is where the pharaoh himself rested, his body—it was believed—mummified but not dead.

Still clutching their torches, sweaty and frenzied from their spree of destruction, the holographic figures moved through the far archway and into the burial chamber. The retaining gates opened and the crowd followed them across the Hall of the Chariots and into the burial chamber, gathering behind another barrier that descended from the ceiling. The voice-over continued as the show began to move toward its climax:

The burial chamber was the resting place of the mummified body of the pharaoh, which contained the pharaoh's Ba-soul, one of the five souls of the dead.

The robbery was planned for broad daylight. That was deliberate: according to Egyptian belief, the pharaoh's Ba-soul was absent from the tomb during the day, journeying with the sun across the sky. At sunset, the Ba-soul would reunite with the pharaoh's mummy. Woe to the robber caught in the tomb after dark, when the mummy came back to life!

But these robbers have not been careful. Clocks did not yet exist, and in the darkness of the tomb a sundial was useless. They have no

way of keeping track of time. And little do they know that, outside the tomb, the sun is already setting...

Once again, the robbers flung themselves into an orgy of violence, smashing the canopic jars, scattering Senef's mummified organs, breaking open baskets of grains and breads, tossing about mummified foodstuffs and pets, decapitating statues. Then they set to work on the great stone sarcophagus itself, jamming cedar poles under one side, slowly dislodging the one-ton lid and wedging it back, millimeter by millimeter, until it toppled from the sarcophagus and broke in two on the floor. Through the magic of holographic projection, the effect was again remarkably real.

Nora felt somebody touch her elbow, and she glanced down to see the mayor smiling at her. "This is utterly fantastic," he whispered with a wink. "It looks like the curse of Senef has finally been lifted."

Looking at his bald pate and round, shiny face, Nora had to smile to herself. He was eating it up, just like an overgrown kid. They all were.

There was no longer any doubt in her mind: the show was a huge—a monster—success.

Chapter 58

D'Agosta watched in sick disbelief as the technicians, both of them now working frantically, continued to type commands on their keyboards.

“What’s wrong?” Hayward demanded.

Enderby wiped his forehead nervously. “I don’t know. The terminal isn’t accepting my commands.”

“Manual override?” Hayward asked.

“Tried that already.”

Hayward turned to Manetti. “Notify the guards in the tomb. Tell them we’re shutting down the show.” She pulled out her radio, preparing to talk to her own officers on the inside. Then she paused, staring at Manetti, who had gone pale. “What is it?”

“That’s just it. I’m trying to contact my men in the tomb. There’s no communication. None.”

“How can that be? They’re less than fifty yards away!”

“The tomb has been shielded against radio frequencies,” said Pendergast quietly.

Hayward put down her radio. “Use the P.A. system. It’s hardwired, right?”

More furious typing from Enderby. “That’s down, too.”

Hayward stared at him. “Cut power to the doors. In the event of a total power failure, they can be levered open by hand.”

Enderby typed some more, then raised his hands in a gesture of futility.

Suddenly, Pendergast pointed at one of the monitors displaying a live feed of the hall. “Did you see that? Rewind it, please.”

One of the technicians digitally rewound the image.

“There.” And Pendergast indicated the blurry outline of a figure, off to one side in the shadows.

“Can you sharpen the image?” he asked urgently. “Magnify it?”

D’Agosta stared as the feed jumped into clearer focus. They all watched as the man slipped a hand inside his dinner jacket, casually extracted a black eye-mask, and put it on. A pair of earplugs followed.

“Menzies,” Hayward murmured.

“Diogenes,” Pendergast said, almost to himself, his voice as cold as ice.

“We need to call for backup,” said Manetti. “Get a SWAT team in here, and—”

“No!” Pendergast broke in. “We don’t have time. That will delay everything—they’ll want to set up a mobile command unit, there will be rules of engagement to follow. We’ve got ten minutes—at the outside.”

“I can’t believe these doors won’t open!” Enderby said, banging at the keyboard. “We programmed two completely independent backups. This doesn’t make sense. Nothing’s responding—”

“And nothing will respond,” said Pendergast. “Those doors aren’t going to open no matter what you do. Menzies—Diogenes—has no doubt hijacked the systems controlling both the show and the hall.” Pendergast turned back to Enderby. “Can you get a list of all running processes?”

“Yes.” Enderby typed a series of commands. D’Agosta glanced over: a small window had opened on the screen, filled with a list of mysterious lowercase words like `asmcomp`, `rutil`, `syslog`, `kcron`.

“Examine all the process names,” Pendergast said. “Especially the system processes. See anything unusual?”

“No.” Enderby peered at the screen. “Yes. This one called `kernel_con_fund_o`.”

“Any idea what it’s for?”

Enderby blinked. “Judging by the name, it’s some kind of console file that accesses the system kernel. That zero at the end also implies

it's a beta version."

"Reverse-engineer the code if you can, get a sense of what it does." Pendergast turned toward Hayward and D'Agosta. "Although I'm afraid I already know the answer."

"What's that?" Hayward asked.

"That's not a zero at the end—it's the letter o. Confundo in Latin means to trouble, distress, throw into confusion. It's no doubt a system routine added by Diogenes to hijack the show." He gestured at the room full of equipment. "I would guess all this equipment—everything—is now under Diogenes's control."

Meanwhile, Enderby was peering at his screen. "There seems to be another server actually running the show, and it's inside the tomb itself. All the systems in the control room, here, are slaved to it."

Pendergast leaned over the technician's shoulder. "Can you attack it, disable it?"

More furious typing. "No. Now it isn't even accepting my input anymore."

"Cut all power to the tomb," Pendergast said.

"It'll just switch to backup—"

"Cut that, too."

"That'll leave them in darkness."

"Do it."

More typing, followed by a frustrated curse. "Nothing."

Pendergast looked around. "In that case, the breaker box." He strode over, flung open the box, and threw the main circuit breaker.

Although the little room was immediately plunged into darkness, the computers remained online. Within seconds, there was a sharp click as the backup power system kicked in, rows of emergency fluorescent tubes flicking on.

Enderby stared at the monitors in disbelief. "Incredible. There's still full power in the tomb. The show's going on like nothing's happened. There must be an internal generator somewhere inside. But

that wasn't on any of the plans I—”

“Where’s the backup power source for this room?” Pendergast interrupted.

Manetti nodded toward a large gray metal cabinet in the corner. “That contains the relays connecting the tomb’s main power cables to the museum’s auxiliary generator.”

Pendergast stepped back and pointed Manetti’s weapon at the cabinet. He emptied a full clip into it—the gunshots incredibly loud in the soundproofed space—walking the rounds from one side of the cabinet to the other, each round punching a large dark hole in the metal and sending chips of gray paint flying. There was a sound of crackling electricity, a massive blue arc, and the lights flickered and went out—leaving only the glow of the computer screens and the stench of cordite and melted insulation.

“These computers are still on,” said Pendergast. “Why?”

“They’ve got their own local battery backup.”

“Force a hard reboot, then. Pull the power cords and plug them back in.”

Enderby crawled under the table and began yanking out cords, throwing the room into utter darkness and silence. There was a snap, then a sudden glow of light as Hayward switched on her flashlight.

The door was abruptly flung open and a tall man with a red ascot and round black glasses advanced. “What is going on here?” he asked in a shrill voice. “I’m directing a live simulcast to millions of people, and you can’t even keep the power on? Listen, my backup power won’t last more than fifteen minutes.”

D’Agosta recognized Randall Loftus, the famous director, his face mottled with anger.

Pendergast turned to D’Agosta, leaned in close. “You know what has to be done, Vincent?”

“Yes,” D’Agosta said. Then he turned toward the director. “Let me help you.”

“I should hope so.” And Loftus turned and walked stiffly out of the room, D’Agosta following.

In the hall beyond, guests were milling around in a darkness relieved only by the glow from hundreds of tea candles set on the tables, excited but not yet alarmed, apparently treating it as an adventure. Museum guards were circulating, reassuring people that the power would be restored at any moment. D'Agosta followed the director to the far end of the hall, where his crew was set up. They were all working quickly and efficiently, murmuring into mikes or observing small camera-mounted monitors.

"We've lost touch with the crew inside," said one. "But it seems their power is still on. They're still broadcasting, and the feed to the uplink is good. In fact, I don't even think they know we've lost power out here."

"Thank God for that," said Loftus. "I'd rather die than deliver dead airtime."

"This feed you mention," D'Agosta asked. "Where is it?"

Loftus nodded toward a thick cable that snaked its way out of the hall, covered with a strip of rubber and secured by gaffer tape.

"I see," said D'Agosta. "And if that cable got cut?"

"God forbid," said Loftus. "We'd lose our simulcast. But it won't be cut, believe me. It would take more than an accidental kick to damage that cable."

"You don't have a backup cable?"

"No need. That cable's got a rubber-and-epoxy-clad sheath, with woven steel—it's indestructible. Well, Officer... ?"

"Lieutenant D'Agosta."

"It appears we don't need you, after all." Loftus turned his back and pointed to another crew member. "You ninny, never leave an open monitor unattended like that!"

D'Agosta looked around. At the far end of the hall, near the entrance, was the obligatory fire station case, containing a coiled hose and a massive Pulaski axe behind a sheet of breakable glass. He strode over, gave the glass a sharp kick, and extracted the Pulaski. Then he walked over to where the taped-down cable turned the corner, braced himself, and raised the axe above his head.

“Hey!” called one of the crew members. “What the hell!”

D’Agosta brought the axe down smartly, neatly chopping the cable in half with a shower of sparks.

An inarticulate howl of rage went up from Randall Loftus.

A moment later, D’Agosta was back in the control room. Pendergast and the technicians were still laboring over the newly rebooted computer system, which was still refusing to accept commands.

Pendergast turned toward him. “Loftus?”

“Beside himself with anger at the moment.”

Pendergast nodded, his lips twitching in a brief semblance of a smile.

Suddenly a barrage of flashing lights on one of the live monitors attracted D’Agosta’s notice.

“What’s that?” Pendergast asked sharply.

“The strobes are firing up,” said Enderby, hunched over the keyboard.

“There are strobe lights in the show?”

“In the later part, yeah. You know, for special effects.”

Pendergast turned his attention to the monitor, the blue glow reflecting his intense gray eyes. More strobe lights flashed on, followed by a strange rumble.

Enderby suddenly sat up. “Wait. That’s not how it’s supposed to go.”

The audio feed from the tomb continued over the monitor, carrying a rising murmur from the audience along with it. Pendergast turned to Hayward. “Captain, during your security review, you consulted a set of plans to the tomb and adjacent areas, I assume?”

“I did.”

“If you had to, what would the best point be to force an entry into the tomb from outside?”

Hayward thought for a moment. "There's a corridor that connects the 81st Street subway station to the museum's subway entrance. It goes behind the back of the tomb, and there's a point where the masonry's only twenty-four inches thick between the walkway and the burial chamber."

"Twenty-four inches of what?"

"Concrete and rebar. It's a load-bearing wall."

"Twenty-four inches of concrete," D'Agosta murmured. "Might as well be a hundred feet. We can't shoot through that, and we can't chop through it. Not in time."

A dreadful hush fell over the little room, punctuated only by the strange booming from inside the hall, and the accompanying murmur of the crowd. As D'Agosta watched, Pendergast's shoulders sank visibly. It's happening, he thought with a thrill of horror. Diogenes is winning. He's thought of everything and there's not a damn thing we can do about it.

But then, as he watched, he saw Pendergast start visibly. The agent's eyes grew bright, and he breathed in sharply. Then he turned toward one of the guards.

"You—your name?"

"Rivera, sir."

"You know where the Taxidermy Department is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go down there and find me a bottle of glycerol."

"Glycerol?"

"It's a chemical used for softening animal skins—there's certain to be some down there." Next, Pendergast turned to Manetti. "Send a couple of your guards down to the chemistry lab. I need bottles of sulfuric acid and nitric acid. They'll find them where the hazardous chemicals are stored."

"May I ask—?"

"No time to explain. I'm also going to need a separation funnel with a stopcock on the bottom, as well as distilled water. And a

thermometer, if they can find one.” Pendergast looked around, found a sheet of paper and a pencil, scribbled some quick notes, and handed the paper to Manetti. “Have them ask a lab technician if they have any problems.”

Manetti nodded.

“In the meantime, clear the hall, please. I want everyone out except NYPD and museum guards.”

“Done.” Manetti motioned to the two guards and they exited the control room.

Pendergast turned to the technicians. “There’s nothing more you can do here. Evacuate with the others.”

They both jumped up, only too eager to get out.

Now Pendergast turned to D’Agosta. “Vincent? I have a job for you and Captain Hayward. Go to the subway station. Help her identify that weak point in the wall.”

D’Agosta exchanged glances with Hayward. “Right.”

“And Vincent? That cable you just cut?” Pendergast gestured toward one of the screens. “Diogenes must have arranged a hidden backup: the simulcast is continuing. Please take care of it.”

“We’re on it.” And D’Agosta left the room, Hayward at his side.

Chapter 59

This is just marvelous!” said the mayor, whispering loudly in Nora’s ear. The holographic tomb robbers, having trashed the burial chamber, were now approaching the open sarcophagus itself. They trembled, hesitated—until one finally dared look in.

“Gold!” the man’s recorded voice gasped. “Solid gold!”

The voice-over intoned:

And now comes the moment of truth. The robbers are gazing inside the sarcophagus at the solid gold coffin of Senef. To the ancient Egyptians, gold was more than a precious metal. They worshiped it as sacred. It was the only substance they knew that didn’t tarnish, fade, or corrode. They considered it to be immortal, the substance making up the very skin of the gods themselves. The coffin represented the immortal pharaoh, resurrected in his skin of gold: the same skin that Ra, the Sun God, wore on his journey across the sky, showering his golden light over the earth.

Everything else they have stolen is merely a prelude to this: the heart of the tomb.

The show continued as the robbers threw up a makeshift tripod of wooden timbers over the sarcophagus, rigged with a block and tackle, to lift off the top of the heavy gold coffin. Two of them climbed into the sarcophagus and began affixing ropes to the coffin inside—and then, with a shout of triumph, the others began to heave and the huge gold coffin lid rose into the light, glittering and magnificent. The audience gasped.

The narrator’s recorded voice began again:

Unbeknownst to the robbers, the sun has now set. The Ba-soul of Senef will be returning to inhabit his mummy for the night, where it will reanimate his dry bones during the hours of darkness.

Here it was: the unleashing of the Ba-soul, the culmination of the curse of Senef. Nora, knowing what was about to come, braced herself.

There was a noise from inside the coffin—a muffled groan. The robbers paused in their work, the gold coffin lid swinging from the ropes. And then the fog machines kicked in and a whitish mist began bubbling up out of the sarcophagus and sliding down its sides. A gasp went up from the audience. Nora smiled to herself. A trifle hokey, perhaps, but effective.

Now a roll of thunder sounded, and through the rising fog the strobes in the corners of the ceiling began to flash, to the accompaniment of ominous rumblings. The strobes began to speed up... and then all four went out of sync, flashing at different rates.

Damn, a glitch. Nora looked around for a technician before realizing they were, of course, all in the control room, monitoring the show by remote. No doubt they would fix it in a moment.

As the strobes continued to accelerate and decelerate at opposing rates, a second rumble sounded—an incredibly low and deep vibration, just at the threshold of human hearing. Now it seemed the sound system was malfunctioning, too. The deep sound was joined by another, and then another: more like physical vibrations in the gut than actual sound.

Oh, no, she thought. The computers are royally messing up. And it was all going so well...

She glanced around again, but the crowd hadn't noticed the glitch—they assumed it was just part of the show. If the technicians could fix it soon, maybe nobody would know. She hoped they were on the ball.

Now the strobes were speeding up even further, except for one—particularly bright—that kept flashing, not quite in time... the lights blended to form a kind of visual Doppler effect that almost made Nora dizzy.

With a deep groaning sound, the mummy abruptly rose from the sarcophagus. The holographic robbers fell back with shrieks of terror—at least that part of the show was still working—some dropping their torches in fright, the light flickering off their staring faces as they cringed in fear.

Senef!

But somehow the mummy didn't look right to Nora—it was bigger, darker, somehow more menacing. Then a bony arm broke free

of its bandages—something not even in the script—and, clawing and twitching, reached up to its own swathed face. The arm was distorted, as elongated as an ape's. The bony fingers sank into the linen wrappings and ripped them away, revealing a visage of such horror that Nora gasped, backing up instinctively. This was over-the-top—way over-the-top. Was this some joke of Wicherly's? Obviously, something this dreadful, this effective, had to be carefully programmed—it wasn't a mere glitch.

There were audible gasps from the audience. "Oh, my goodness!" the mayor's wife said.

Nora looked around. The crowd continued to stare at the still-rising mummy as if mesmerized, swaying, uncomfortable now. She could feel their fear rising like a miasma, their voices tight and hushed. Viola caught her eye, gave her a questioning frown. Beyond, Nora could make out the face of Collopy, the museum director. He looked pale.

The malfunctioning strobe lights kept flashing, flashing, flashing in her peripheral vision, so very brightly, and Nora felt a real twinge of dizziness. Another gut-twisting low note sounded, and she closed her eyes momentarily against the combined assault of the brilliant lights and the deep sounds. She heard more gasps around her, then a scream, choked off almost before it started. What the hell was this? Those sounds—she had never heard anything like them. They were like the sounding of the last trump, full of dread and horror, so loud it seemed to violate her very being.

The mummy now began to open its jaw, the dry lips cracking and flaking off as they drew back from a rack of brown, rotting teeth. The mouth became a sinkhole of black slime, which began to seethe and wriggle. Then, as she watched in horror, it morphed into a swarm of greasy black cockroaches, which began rustling and crawling their way out of the ruined orifice. Another horrible groaning, and then there was a second explosion of strobe flashes of such incredible intensity that, when she closed her eyes, she could still see them flashing through her eyelids...

... but a hideous buzzing sound forced her to open her eyes again. It now looked as if the mummy were vomiting blackness—the swarm of insects had taken flight, the cockroaches morphing into fat lubricious wasps, their mandibles clicking like knitting needles as they flew toward the audience with a horrible believability.

She felt a sudden wave of vertigo, and she swayed, instinctively grabbing the person next to her—the mayor—who was himself stumbling and unsteady.

“Oh my God—!”

She heard someone vomiting, a cry for help—and then a flurry of short screams as the crowd surged back, trying to escape the insects. Although Nora knew they had to be holographically generated, like everything else, they looked amazingly real as they came straight at her, each with a vicious stinger extruded from its abdomen, gleaming with venom. She stumbled backward instinctively, felt herself falling, with no bottom, falling like the robber in the well, to a chorus of wails around her like the shrieks of the damned being sucked into hell itself.

Chapter 60

Constance was awakened by a discreet rapping on her bedroom door. Without opening her eyes, she turned over with a sigh, nuzzling gently at the down pillow.

The knock came again, a little louder now. “Constance? Constance, is everything all right?” It was the voice of Wren—shrill, worried.

Constance stretched languorously—deliciously—then sat up in bed. “I’m fine,” she said with a twinge of irritation.

“Is anything the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter, thank you.”

“You’re not ill?”

“Certainly not. I’m fine.”

“You’ll forgive my intrusion. It’s just that I’ve never known you to sleep all day like this. It’s eight-thirty, past time for supper, and you’re still abed.”

“Yes,” was all Constance said in return.

“Would you care for your usual breakfast, then? Green tea and a piece of buttered toast?”

“Not the usual breakfast, thank you, Wren. If you could manage it, I’d like poached eggs, cranberry juice, kippers, half a dozen rashers of bacon, a grapefruit half, and a scone with a pot of jam, please.”

“I—very well.” She heard Wren fussing his way back down the hall toward the stairs.

Constance settled back into the pillows, closing her eyes again. Her sleep had been long and deep and completely dreamless—most unusual for her. She recalled the bottomless emerald green of the absinthe, the strange feeling of lightness it gave her—as if she were watching herself from a distance. A private smile flitted across her face, vanished, then returned again, as if prompted by some

recollection. She settled deeper into the pillows, letting her limbs relax beneath the soft sheets.

Gradually, very gradually, she became aware of something. There was a scent in the room, an unusual scent.

She sat up in bed again. It was not the scent of—of him; it was something she didn't think she'd ever smelled before. It was not unpleasant, really... just different.

She looked around for a moment, trying to trace the source. She checked the bedside table without success.

It was only as an afterthought that she slipped a hand beneath the pillows.

There she found something: an envelope, and a long box, wrapped in an antique paper and tied with a black ribbon. These were the source of the scent: a musky smell redolent of the deep woods. Quickly, she pulled them out.

The envelope was of cream-laid linen paper, and the box was just large enough to hold a diamond choker, or perhaps a bracelet. Constance smiled, then flushed deeply.

She opened the envelope eagerly. Out fell three pages of dense, elegant handwriting. She began to read.

I hope you slept well, my dearest Constance: the sweet sleep of the innocent.

There is a good chance it will be your last such sleep for some time. Then again—if you take the advice in this letter—sleep may come again, and very soon.

As I've whiled away these pleasant hours with you, I must admit to having wondered something. What has it been like, all these many years, to live under the same roof as Uncle Antoine, the man you called Enoch Leng: the man who brutally murdered your sister, Mary Greene?

Did you know this, Constance? That Antoine killed and vivisected your sister? Surely you must have. Perhaps at first it was just a supposition, a strange twinge of dark fancy. No doubt you ascribed it to your own perverse cast of mind. But over time—and you two had so very much time—it must have come to seem, first a possibility,

then a certainty. Yet no doubt this was all subconscious, buried so deep as to be almost undiscoverable. And yet you knew it: of course you did.

What a deliciously ironic situation. This man, Antoine Pendergast, killed your very own sister—for the furthering of his own mortal life... and ultimately yours as well! This is the man to whom you owe everything! Do you know how many children had to die so that he could develop his elixir, so that you could enjoy your abnormally extended childhood? You were born normal, Constance; but thanks to Uncle Antoine, you became a freak of nature. That was your word, wasn't it? Freak.

And now, my dear, duped Constance, you can no longer shove this idea aside. You can no more dismiss it as a flight of imagination, or a dark irrational fear on those nights when the thunder rumbles and you cannot sleep. Because the worst is, in fact, true: this is precisely what happened. Your sister was murdered to prolong your life. I know, because before he died, Uncle Antoine told me so himself.

Oh, yes: I had several chats with the old gentleman. How could I not seek out a dear relative with such a colorful history, with a worldview so similar to my own? The very possibility that he might still be alive after all those decades added excitement to my search, and I did not rest until I at length tracked him down. He quickly sensed my own true nature, and naturally became most anxious that your path should never cross mine—but in return for my promise never to meet you, he seemed happy enough to discuss his, shall we say, unique solution for a broken world. And he confirmed everything: the existence of his concoction for the prolongation of life—although he withheld from me the manner of its preparation. Dear Uncle Antoine, I was sorry to see him go; the world was a most interesting place with him in it. But at the time of his murder, I was too closely involved in my own plans to help him escape his fate.

So I ask one more time: what was it like for you to live in this house for so many, many years as helpmate to your sister's killer? I can't even begin to imagine it. No wonder your psyche is so frail—no wonder my brother fears for the soundness of your mind. Together, alone, in this house: was it possible that you even grew to become, shall we say, on intimate terms with Antoine? But no, not that: I am the first man to become master of that shrine, dearest Constance: the physical evidence was incontrovertible. But you loved him—no doubt you loved him.

And so what now is left for you, my poor pitiable Constance? My precious fallen angel? Handmaiden to fratricide, consort to your sister's murderer? The very air you breathe you owe to her, and to Antoine's other victims. Do you deserve to continue this perverse existence? And who will mourn your passing? My brother, surely not: you would be a guilty burden to him no more. Wren? Proctor? How risible. I shall not mourn you: you were a toy; a mystery easily solved; a dull box forced and found empty; an animal spasm. So let me give you a piece of advice, and please believe this to be the one honest, altruistic thing I have ever told you.

Do the noble thing. End your unnatural life.

Ever your

Diogenes

P.S. I was surprised to see how juvenile your earlier attempt at suicide was. Surely, you now know not to slash willy-nilly across your wrists; the knife is arrested by the tendons. For a more satisfactory result, cut lengthwise, between the tendons: just one cut: slow, forceful, and above all, deep. As for my own scar: isn't it remarkable what one can do with a bit of greasepaint and wax?

A long, unfathomable moment passed.

Then, Constance turned her attention to the small present. She picked it up and unwrapped it, slowly, gingerly, as one might a bomb. Inside was a hinged box of beautifully polished rosewood.

Just as slowly, she opened the box. Within, nestled on purple velvet, rested an antique scalpel. The handle was of yellowed ivory; the blade itself was polished to great brilliance. Extending an index finger, she stroked the handle of the scalpel. It was cool and smooth. Carefully she drew the scalpel out of the box, balancing it in the palm of her hand, turning it in the light, staring at the mirrored blade that flashed like a diamond in the firelight.

Chapter 61

When the lights went out, Smithback paused, a raw oyster halfway to his mouth. There was a millisecond of utter darkness before a deep clunk sounded somewhere and the emergency lights came on, rows of fluorescent tubes in the ceiling, bathing everything in a hideous greenish-white light.

He looked around. Most of the VIPs in the crowd had gone into the tomb, but the second shift remained, with plenty of serious drinkers and eaters, standing around or sitting at tables. They remained calm, taking the power failure in stride.

Shrugging, he tipped the oyster shell into his mouth and sucked in the briny, still-living slithery bolus, smacked his lips in enjoyment, and plucked a second oyster from the plate, readying it for the same operation.

And then he heard the shots: six muffled reports from the darkness beyond the far end of the hall: a heavy-caliber handgun firing in a measured cadence, one shot after another. With a dying crackle, the emergency lights went out—and Smithback knew immediately that something big was going down, that there was a story happening. The only light in the hall now came from the hundreds of tea candles spread out on the dinner tables. There were murmurings from the remaining crowd, a rising sense of alarm.

Smithback looked in the direction of the gunshots. He recalled seeing various technicians and staff going in and out of a door in the rear of the hall as the evening progressed, and he figured it must lead to the control room for the Tomb of Senef. As he watched, somebody he recognized—Vincent D’Agosta—came through that door. Not in uniform at the moment, but still looking every inch the cop. With him was somebody else Smithback recognized: Randall Loftus, the well-known director. He watched them make their way toward the small knot of television cameras.

A stab of uneasiness struck Smithback as he realized his wife, Nora, was inside the tomb. Probably stuck in utter darkness. But the tomb had a full complement of guards and cops, so she was certainly safe. Something was happening here, and it was his job as a reporter to find out just what it was. He watched D’Agosta cross the hall, break

the glass in an emergency fire station, and remove an axe.

He pulled out his notebook and pencil, noted the time, and jotted down what he was seeing. D'Agosta walked over to a cable, positioned the axe, and brought it down with a clunk, eliciting a roar of protest from Loftus and the PBS technicians. Ignoring them, D'Agosta walked calmly back, axe in hand, to the small door in the rear of the hall, which he then closed behind him.

The tension in the hall increased by an order of magnitude.

Whatever was happening, it was big.

Smithback swiftly followed in D'Agosta's wake. Reaching the door to the control room, he put his hand on the knob. Then he paused. If he barged in there, he was likely to be ejected. Better to hang back, mingle with the crowd, and wait for the other shoe to drop.

It didn't take long. Within minutes, D'Agosta, still carrying the axe, and Captain Hayward burst out the door, jogged down the hall, and disappeared out the main exit. A moment later, Manetti, the director of security, came out, climbed onto the darkened podium, and addressed the remaining partygoers.

Again, Smithback noted the time and began to take notes.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he cried out, his voice barely penetrating the vast murky interior.

A hush fell.

"We're experiencing some power problems, some technical problems. Nothing to be alarmed about, but we're going to have to clear the hall. The guards will escort you out the way you came in and up to the rotunda. Please follow their instructions."

A murmur of disappointment rose up. Someone shouted out, "What about the people in the tomb?"

"The people in the tomb will be escorted out as soon as we open the doors. There's nothing to be concerned about."

"Are the doors stuck?" Smithback yelled.

"Momentarily, yes."

More restlessness. It was clear people did not want to go, leaving

their friends or loved ones behind in the tomb.

“Please move toward the exit!” Manetti shouted. “The guards will escort everyone out. There is nothing to be alarmed about.” There were some murmurs of protest from guests clearly unused to being told what to do.

Bullshit, thought Smithback. If there was nothing to be alarmed about, why was there a quaver in Manetti’s voice? There was no way in hell he was going to allow himself to be “escorted” out of the building just as the story was breaking—and especially with Nora still stuck in the tomb.

He looked around, then ducked outside the hall. The velvet ropes ran down the basement corridor, lit only by the battery-operated exit signs. Another corridor sat at right angles to the main hallway, roped off, running into darkness. Guards with flashlights were already herding groups of protesting people toward the exit.

Smithback sprinted on ahead to where the corridor branched off, vaulted the velvet rope, ran through the darkness, and ducked into an entryway marked Alcoholic Storage, Genus Rattus.

He flattened himself against the shallow door frame and waited.

Chapter 62

Vincent D'Agosta and Laura Hayward sprinted between the velvet ropes, down the front steps of the museum, and along Museum Drive. The entrance to the subway stood at the corner of 81st Street, a dingy metal kiosk with a copper roof, perched on the corner. Parked near it, just beyond the seething crowd of rubberneckers, D'Agosta spotted the PBS television van, cables snaking from it across the lawn and through a window into the museum. A white satellite dish was set atop the van.

"Over here!" D'Agosta began to push his way through the crowd toward the van, gripping the axe. Hayward was at his side, hand up displaying her shield.

"NYPD!" she cried. "Make way, please!"

When the crowd seemed reluctant to part, D'Agosta raised the axe over his head with both hands and began to pump it up and down. The crowd parted before them, exposing a thin path to the van.

They ran around to the rear of the vehicle. Hayward held back the crowd while D'Agosta stepped up onto the bumper. Grasping the rack on top of the van, he pulled himself onto the roof.

A man leaped out of the van. "What the hell are you doing?" he cried. "We've got a live broadcast in session!"

"NYPD Homicide," said Hayward, positioning herself between him and the bumper.

D'Agosta steadied himself on top of the van, legs apart. Then he raised the axe above his head again.

"Hey! You can't do that!"

"Watch me." With one tremendous swing, D'Agosta struck through the metal posts supporting the satellite dish, popping the bolts and sending them flying. Then he swung the flat end of the axe against the dish: once, twice. With a creaking groan of metal, it toppled over the edge of the roof and crashed to the street below.

"Are you crazy—?" the technician began.

Ignoring him, D'Agosta leaped off, tossed the axe aside, and he and Hayward shoved their way through the fringes of the crowd, heading for the subway entrance.

Dimly, D'Agosta was aware it was Laura Hayward at his side: his own Laura, who'd had him escorted out of her office just days before. He thought he had lost her irretrievably—and yet, she had sought him out.

She had sought him out. It was a delicious thought. He reminded himself to return to it if he survived the rest of the night.

Reaching the entrance to the subway, they ran down the stairs and sprinted over to the ticket booth. Hayward flashed her shield at the woman inside.

“Captain Hayward, NYPD Homicide. There's a situation in the museum and we need to clear this station. Call Transit Authority HQ and have them flag the station as a skip until further notice. I don't want any trains stopping. Understand?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

They jumped the turnstiles, ran down the corridor, and entered the station proper. It was still early—not yet nine—and there were several dozen people waiting for the train. Hayward trotted along the platform, and D'Agosta followed. At the far end, a corridor branched off, with a large tiled sign above:

New York Museum of Natural History

Walkway to Entrance

Open During Museum Hours Only

An accordion grille of dingy, rusted metal sealed off the corridor, secured with a massive padlock.

“Better talk to those people,” murmured Hayward, pulling out her gun and pointing it at the lock.

D'Agosta nodded. He walked back along the platform, waving his shield. “NYPD! Clear the station! Everybody out!”

People looked over at him disinterestedly.

“Out! Police action, clear the station!”

The sound of two gunshots thundered down the platform, waking everyone up. They began to move back toward the exits, suddenly alarmed, and amidst the confused hubbub of the increasingly rapid retreat D'Agosta heard the words terrorist and bomb drifting toward him.

"I want everyone to leave in a calm and orderly fashion!" he called after them.

A third ripping gunshot cleared the station completely. D'Agosta ran back to find Hayward wrestling with the grille. He helped push it back and together they ducked through.

Ahead of them, the corridor stretched for a hundred yards before taking a sharp turn toward the museum's subway entrance. Tilework along the walls showed images of mammal and dinosaur skeletons, and there were framed posters announcing upcoming museum exhibitions, including several for the Grand Tomb of Senef. Hayward pulled a small set of plans from her pocket and unrolled them on the cement floor. The plans were covered with scribbled notations—it looked to D'Agosta as if she had gone over them many times.

"That's the tomb," said Hayward, pointing at the map. "And there's the subway tunnel. And look—right over here, there's only about two feet of concrete between the corner of the tomb and this tunnel."

D'Agosta squatted, examined the plat. "I don't see any exact measurements on the subway side."

"There aren't any. They only surveyed the tomb, estimating the rest."

D'Agosta frowned. "The scale is ten feet to the inch. That doesn't give us much precision."

"No."

She consulted the map a moment longer, then, gathering it up, she paced off about a hundred feet down the corridor before stopping again. "My best guess is that this is the thin spot, right here."

The rumble of a subway car began to fill the air, followed by a roar as it passed the station without stopping, the noise quickly fading.

“You’ve been in the tomb?” said D’Agosta.

“Vinnie, I’ve practically been living in the tomb.”

“And you can hear the subway in there?”

“All the time. They couldn’t get rid of it.”

D’Agosta pressed his ear to the tiled wall. “If they can hear out, we should be able to hear in.”

“They’d have to be making a lot of noise in there.”

He straightened up, looked at Hayward. “They are.”

Then he pressed his ear to the wall again.

Chapter 63

From his hiding place in the dim doorway, Smithback watched the murmuring, complaining crowds being ushered out of the hall toward the elevators. He lingered a few minutes after the last had passed by, then crept forward, ducked under the velvet rope, and inched along the wall to the corner, where he could peer into the Egyptian Hall. It wasn't difficult to stay hidden: the only light came from the hundreds of candles still flickering in the hall, leaving much of the antechamber in darkness.

Pressed into the shadows beside the entrance, he watched a small knot of people emerge from the side door leading to the control room. He recognized Manetti, in his usual ugly brown suit, sporting an impressive comb-over. The rest were museum guards except for one man who, in particular, attracted his attention. He was tall and brown-haired, wearing a white turtleneck and slacks. Although his face was turned away, a large bandage was clearly visible on one cheek. What attracted Smithback's attention wasn't so much the man's appearance as the way he moved: so smoothly and gracefully it seemed almost feline. It reminded him of someone...

He watched as the man strode to a huge silver cauldron of crushed ice. Dozens of champagne bottles had been pressed into the ice, their snouts pointing upward.

"Help me get rid of these bottles," Smithback heard the man say to Manetti—and the instant he spoke, Smithback recognized that honeyed voice.

Special Agent Pendergast. Out of prison? What's he doing here? He felt a sudden thrill of excitement and surprise: here was the man whose name he'd been working to clear, walking around as casually as if he owned the place. But along with the excitement came a sudden sinking feeling—in his experience, Pendergast appeared only when the shit was really hitting the fan.

Two of the guards jogged up to the tomb entrance, and Smithback watched as they made an attempt to lever open the doors with a wrecking bar and a sledgehammer, without success.

Smithback felt the sinking feeling increase. People were trapped

inside the tomb—he knew that—but why this sudden desperate effort to get them out? Was something going wrong inside?

His blood ran cold with speculation. Fact was, the tomb presented a perfect opportunity to launch a terrorist attack. An incredible concentration of money, power, and influence was inside: dozens of political bigwigs, along with an elite slice of the country's corporate, legal, and scientific leadership—not to mention everybody of importance at the museum itself.

He returned his attention to Pendergast, who was pulling the bottles of champagne out of the ice and hurling them into a trash can. In another moment, he'd emptied the cauldron, leaving only a heap of crushed and melting ice. Now he stepped to an adjoining food table and, with a great sweep of his hand, cleared it of its contents, sending platters of oysters, mounds of caviar, cheeses, prosciutto, and breads crashing to the floor. Aghast, Smithback watched a massive Brie roll like a white wheel all the way across the hall before coming to a gluey rest in a dark corner.

Next, Pendergast went from table to table, collecting dozens of tea candles and arranging them in a circle around the cleared area to provide illumination.

What the hell is he doing?

A man came into the hall at a dead run, carrying a bottle of something, which Pendergast immediately snatched up, checked, then shoved into the mound of crushed ice. Two more men arrived, one pushing a cart crammed with bottles and laboratory equipment—beakers and flasks—which were also shoved into the ice.

Pendergast straightened and, his back to Smithback's hiding place, began rolling up his sleeves. "I need a volunteer," he said.

"What exactly are you doing?" asked Manetti.

"Making nitroglycerin."

There was a silence.

Manetti cleared his throat. "This is crazy. Surely there's a better way to get into the tomb than blowing your way in."

"No volunteers?"

“I’m calling for a SWAT team,” said Manetti. “We need professionals to break in there. We can’t just blow it up willy-nilly.”

“Well, then,” said Pendergast, “how about you, Mr. Smithback?”

Smithback froze in the blackness, hesitated, looked around. “Who, me?” he said in a small voice.

“You’re the only Smithback here.”

Smithback emerged from the shadows of the doorway and stepped into the hall, and only now did Pendergast turn and look him in the eye.

“Well, sure,” Smithback stammered. “Always happy to help a— Wait. Did you say nitro?”

“I did.”

“Will it be dangerous?”

“Given my inexperience at the synthesis, and the impurity of the formulation that will inevitably result, I’d estimate our chances are slightly better than fifty percent.”

“Chances at what?”

“Enduring a premature detonation.”

Smithback swallowed. “You must... be worried about what’s happening in the tomb.”

“I am, in fact, terrified, Mr. Smithback.”

“My wife’s in there.”

“Then you have a special incentive to help.”

Smithback stiffened. “Just tell me what to do.”

“Thank you.” Pendergast turned to Manetti. “See to it that everyone leaves the hall and takes cover.”

“I’m calling for a SWAT team, and I strongly suggest—”

But the look on Pendergast’s face silenced the security director. The guards hastened out of the hall, Manetti following, his radio

crackling.

Pendergast glanced back at Smithback. "Now, if you will kindly follow my instructions to the letter, we will have a fair chance of pulling this off."

He went back to setting up the equipment: rotating the bottles in the ice to chill them more quickly; taking a flask, shoving it deep into the ice, setting a glass thermometer within it. "The problem, Mr. Smithback, is that we have no time to do this properly. We need to mix the chemicals quickly. And that sometimes provokes an undesirable result."

"Look, what's happening in the tomb?"

"Let us concentrate on the problem at hand, please."

Smithback swallowed again, trying to get a grip on himself. All thought of a big story had vanished. Nora is in there, Nora is in there—the phrase pounded in his head like a drumbeat.

"Hand me the bottle of sulfuric acid, but wipe it off first."

Smithback located the bottle, pulled it out of the ice, wiped it down, and handed it to Pendergast, who poured it carefully into the chilled flask. A nasty, acrid smell arose. When the agent was satisfied he had poured in the requisite amount, he stepped back and capped the bottle. "Check the temperature."

Smithback peered down at the glass thermometer, pulled it from the flask, held it close enough to a candle to read.

"Needless to say," said Pendergast dryly, "you will take exquisite care with that candle flame. I should also mention these acids will dissolve human flesh in a matter of seconds."

Smithback's hand jerked away.

"Give me the nitric acid. Same procedure, please."

Smithback wiped off the bottle and handed it to Pendergast. The agent unscrewed the top and held it up, examining the label.

"As I pour this in, I want you to stir the solution with the thermometer, reading off the temperature at thirty-second intervals."

"Right."

Pendergast measured the acid into a graduated cylinder, then began pouring it, a tiny amount at a time, into the chilled flask while Smithback stirred.

“Ten degrees,” said Smithback.

More exquisitely slow pouring.

“Eighteen... twenty-five... Going up fast... Thirty...”

The mixture began to foam and Smithback could feel the heat of it on his face, along with a hideous stench. The ice began melting around the beaker.

“Don’t breathe those fumes,” said Pendergast, pausing in his pouring. “And keep stirring.”

“Thirty-five... thirty-six... thirty-four... thirty-one...”

“It’s stabilizing,” said Pendergast, relief audible in his voice. He resumed pouring in the nitric acid, a tiny bit at a time.

In the silence, Smithback thought he could hear something. He listened intently: it was the sound of distant screaming, muffled to a faint whisper. And then a thud sounded from the direction of the tomb, and then another, which rapidly became a dull pounding.

He straightened suddenly. “Jesus, they’re pounding on the tomb door!”

“Mr. Smithback! Continue reading the temperatures.”

“Right. Thirty... twenty-eight... twenty-six...”

The muffled pounding continued. Pendergast was pouring so slowly Smithback thought he would be driven mad.

“Twenty.” Smithback tried to concentrate. “Eighteen. Please, hurry.” He found his hand shaking, and as he removed the thermometer to read it, he fumbled and splashed some drops of the sulfuric-nitric acid mix on the back of his hand.

“Oh, shit!”

“Keep stirring, Mr. Smithback.”

It felt like his hand had been splattered with molten lead, and he

could see smoke rising from the black spots where the acid had fallen on his skin.

Pendergast finished pouring. “I’ll take over. Put your hand in the ice.”

Smithback plunged his hand into the ice while Pendergast grabbed a small box of baking soda, ripped off the top. “Give me your hand.”

He extracted it from the ice. Pendergast shook baking powder over the burn marks with one hand while stirring with the other. “The acids are neutralized now. It’ll be a nasty scar—no more. Please resume stirring while I prepare for the next addition.”

“Right.” Smithback’s hand felt like it was on fire, but the thought of Nora trapped in the tomb reduced the pain to insignificance.

Pendergast removed another bottle from the ice, wiped it off, and measured some of the contents carefully into a small beaker.

The pounding, the screaming, seemed to be getting even more frantic.

“While I pour, you slowly rotate the flask in its ice bath like a cement mixer, keeping it tilted, and read off the temperature every fifteen seconds. Do not stir—don’t even knock the thermometer against the glass. Understand?”

“Yes.”

With excruciating slowness, Pendergast poured while Smithback kept rotating.

“The temperature, Mr. Smithback?”

“Ten... twenty... It’s shooting up... Thirty-five...” The sweat appearing now on Pendergast’s forehead frightened Smithback almost more than anything else. “Thirty-five still... Hurry, please, for God’s sake!”

“Keep rotating,” the agent said, his calm voice in sharp contrast to his damp brow.

“Twenty-five...” The distant pounding continued unabated. “Twenty... twelve... ten...”

Pendergast poured another small amount in, and once again, the temperature shot up. They waited for what seemed an eternity.

“Look, can’t you just mix it all up now?”

“If we blow ourselves up, there’s no hope for them, Mr. Smithback.”

Smithback forced down his impatience, reading off the temperature and rotating the flask, while Pendergast continued pouring bit by bit, pausing between pours. At last he tipped up the beaker.

“First stage complete. Now grab that separatory funnel and pour in some distilled water from that jug, there.”

Smithback picked up the funnel, which looked like a drawn-out glass bulb, a long glass tube with a stopcock angling away from its bottom. Taking the glass plug from its top, he filled the funnel with water from a jug sitting in the ice.

“Shove it upright into the ice, if you please.”

Smithback pushed the funnel into the ice.

Pendergast picked up the flask and, with infinite care, poured the contents into the separatory funnel. As Smithback looked on apprehensively, the agent performed the last several steps. Now a white paste lay in the beaker. Pendergast held up the beaker, examined it briefly, then turned to Smithback. “Let’s go.”

“That’s it? We’re done?” Smithback could still hear the pounding: rising to a crescendo now, backed up by ever-more-hysterical screaming.

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s hurry up and blow the door!”

“No—that door’s too heavy. Even if we could, we’d kill people: they’re all assembled just on the other side, by the sound of it. I’ve got a better entry point.”

“Where?”

“Follow me.” Pendergast had already turned and was heading out the door, breaking into a catlike run, cradling the beaker protectively.

“It’s outside, in the subway station. To get there, we’ll have to leave the museum and run the gauntlet of bystanders outside. Your job, Mr. Smithback, is to get me through that crowd.”

Chapter 64

With a superhuman effort, Nora steadied herself, tried to focus her mind. She realized she was not falling into the well: that the sensation of falling was, in fact, an illusion. The holographic insects had scattered the crowd, inducing a growing panic. The dreadful low throbbing sounds were getting louder, like an infernal drumbeat, and the strobe lights were brighter and more painful than any she had ever experienced. These were not the strobes she had seen in the equipment tests: these flashed so violently that they seemed to be penetrating into her very brain.

She swallowed, looked around. The holographic image of the mummy had vanished, but the fog machines had accelerated and mist was boiling out of the sarcophagus, filling the burial chamber like rising water. The strobes were flashing into the rising fog with extreme rapidity, and each flash blossomed horribly in the mist.

Beside her, Nora felt Viola stumble, and she reached out and grasped the Egyptologist's hand. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"No, I'm not. What in bloody hell is going on, Nora?"

"I... I don't know. Some kind of terrible malfunction."

"Those insects were no malfunction. Those had to be programmed. And these lights..." Viola winced, averting her eyes.

The fog had reached their waists and was still rising. Staring into it, Nora felt an indescribable panic welling up in her. Soon it would fill the room, engulfing them all... It felt as if they were about to drown in the mist and the welter of flashing lights. There were shouts, scattered screams, as the crowd panicked.

"We've got to get this crowd out," she gasped.

"Yes, we must. But, Nora, I can hardly think straight..."

Not far away, Nora saw a man gesticulating madly. In one hand, he held a shield that flashed brilliantly in the winking strobes. "If everybody would please stay calm!" he cried. "I'm a New York City police officer. We're going to get you out of here. But please,

everybody, stay calm!”

Nobody paid the slightest attention.

Closer at hand, Nora heard a familiar voice cry out for help. Turning, she saw the mayor a few feet away, bent over, groping downward into the fog. “My wife—she fell! Elizabeth, where are you?”

The crowd suddenly surged backward in a violent crush, accompanied by a ripple of screams, and Nora felt herself borne along against her will. She saw the undercover cop go down beneath the press of bodies.

“Help!” cried the mayor.

Nora struggled to reach him, but the enormous press of the crowd carried her farther away, and a fresh rumble from the sound system drowned out the mayor’s frantic calls.

I’ve got to do something.

“Listen!” she cried at the top of her lungs. “Listen to me! Everyone listen!”

A lessening of the cries close around her proved that at least some people had heard.

“We have to work together if we’re going to get out. Understand? Everyone join hands and move toward the exit! Do not run or push! Follow me!”

To her amazement and relief, her little speech seemed to have a calming effect. The cries lessened further, and she felt Viola grasp her hand.

The fog was now up to her chest, its surface roiled and tendril-strewn. In a moment, they would be covered, blinded.

“Pass the word along! Keep holding hands! Follow me!”

Nora and Viola moved forward, guiding the crowd. Another enormous boom that was more a sensation than sound—and the crowd surged again in utter panic, abandoning any pretense to order.

“Hold hands!” she cried.

But it was too late: the crowd had lost its mind. Nora felt herself borne along, crushed in the press, the air literally squeezed from her lungs.

“Stop pushing!” she cried, but no one was listening any longer. She heard Viola beside her, also calling for calm, but her voice was swallowed up in the panic of the crowd and the deep booming sounds that filled the tomb. The strobes kept flashing, each flash causing a brief, brilliant explosion of light in the fog. And with each flash, she seemed to feel stranger, heavy... almost drugged. This wasn’t just fear she was feeling: it was something else. What was happening to her head?

The crowd surged toward the Hall of the Chariots, possessed by a mindless, animal panic. Nora clung to Viola’s hand with all her might. Suddenly a new sound cut in over the deep booming—a high keening at the threshold of audibility, rising and falling like a banshee. The razor-sharp shriek seemed to riddle her consciousness like a shotgun blast, increasing the strange sensation of alienness. Another surge in the crowd caused her to lose her grip on Viola’s hand.

“Viola!”

If there was an answering cry, it was lost in the tumult.

All of a sudden, the pressure around her relented, as if a cork had been released. She gasped, sucking air into her lungs, shaking her head in an attempt to clear it. The fog without seemed mirrored by another fog, growing within her mind.

A pilaster loomed into view through the gloom ahead. She clung to it, recognized a bas-relief: and suddenly knew where she was. The door to the Hall of the Chariots was just up ahead. If they could just get through it and away from the infernal fog...

She flattened herself against the wall, then felt her way along it, keeping out of the panicked crowd, until she could make out the door ahead. People were squeezing through, fighting and clawing, ripping at one another’s clothes, forming a bloody bottleneck of insanity and panic. More grotesque, deep groaning from the hidden speakers, along with an intensification of the bansheelike wail. Under this assault of noise, Nora felt a sudden vertigo, as if she were sinking; the kind of awful swoon she sometimes experienced in the throes of a fever. She staggered, fought to keep her feet: to fall now might mean the end.

She heard a cry and saw, through the swirling mist, a woman

nearby, lying on one side, being trampled by the crowd. Instinctively, she bent forward, grabbed an upraised hand, and hauled her to her feet. The woman's face was bloody, one leg crooked and obviously broken—but she was still alive.

“My leg,” the woman groaned.

“Put your arm around my shoulder!” Nora yelled.

She forced herself into the stream of people and the two were borne along through the doorway into the Hall of the Chariots. A dreadful, growing pressure... and then suddenly there was space, people milling about, disoriented, their clothes torn and bloody, weeping, shrieking for help. The woman sagged on her shoulder like a dead weight, whimpering. At least here they would be rid of the murderous barrage...

And yet, strangely, they were not. She had not escaped the sound, or the fog, or the strobe lights. Nora looked around, disbelieving. The fog was still rising fast, and more lights flashed from the ceiling—relentless, blinding bursts that each seemed to cloud her brain a little further.

Viola's right, she thought in a vague, confused way. This was no malfunction. The script didn't call for strobes or fog in the Hall of the Chariots; only in the burial chamber itself.

This was something planned—deliberate.

She clutched her throbbing head with one hand, urging the woman along, plodding slowly forward toward the God's Second Passage and the tomb exit that lay beyond. But once again, a seething mass blocked the narrow door at the far end.

“One at a time!” Nora screamed.

Directly ahead of her, a man was trying to beat his way through the crowd. With her free arm, she seized him by his tuxedo collar, yanking him off balance. He looked around wildly, took a swing at her.

“Bitch!” he yelled. “I'll kill you!”

Nora backed off in horror and the man turned back, grabbing and tearing at the people before him. But it wasn't just him: all around, people were screaming, boiling with rage, eyes rolling in their sockets

—utter bedlam, a Boschian vision of hell.

She felt it even within herself: overwhelming agitation; a muddy, unfocused fury; an impending sense of doom. Yet nothing had actually happened. There was no fire, no mass murder—nothing to justify this kind of mass insanity...

Nora spotted the museum's director, Frederick Watson Collopy. His face looked shattered and he was staggering forward toward the doorway, one dead-looking leg trailing behind him: Draaaag-thump! Draaaag-thump!

He spied her and his ravaged face grew bright and hungry. He staggered toward her through the crush. "Nora! Help me!"

He seized the injured woman. Nora was about to thank him for his help, when he tossed her roughly to the ground.

Nora looked at him in horror. "What the hell are you doing?" She stepped forward to help the woman but Collopy seized her with incredible force, his hands clawing and grasping at her like a drowning man. She tried to twist free, but his desperate strength was shocking. In his frenzy, he twisted one arm around her neck.

"Help me!" he screamed again. "I can't walk!"

Nora jabbed him in the solar plexus with her elbow and he staggered, but still clung to her.

There was a sudden flash by her side and Nora saw Viola, kicking Collopy fiercely in the shins. With a shriek, Collopy released his grip and collapsed to the floor, writhing and spitting curses.

Nora grabbed Viola and together they backed away from the writhing crowd, staggered toward the rear wall of the Hall of the Chariots. There was a crash and the sound of shattering glass as a display case toppled over.

"My head, my head!" Viola groaned, pressing her hands to her eyes. "I can't think straight."

"It's like everyone's gone crazy."

"I feel like I'm going crazy."

"I think it's the strobe lights," Nora said, coughing. "And the

sounds... or maybe some chemical in the fog.”

“What do you mean?”

And then a swirling image appeared above them—a huge three-dimensional spinning spiral. With a thudding groan of sound, it twisted slowly... and then a piercing tone sounded, and another a quarter tone away, and another, throbbing and beating in dissonance, as the spiral began to rotate faster. Nora stared at it, instantly mesmerized. It was a holographic projection, it had to be. And yet it was real... it was like nothing she had ever seen before. It drew her forward, sucking her in, pulling her down into a maelstrom of insanity.

With a huge effort, she tore her eyes away. “Don’t look at it, Viola!”

Viola trembled all over, her eyes still fixated on the swirling image.

“Stop it!” Nora slapped her across the face with her free hand.

Viola just shook her head to clear the blow, her eyes wild, still staring.

“The show!” Nora said, shaking her. “It’s doing something to our minds!”

“What... ?” Viola’s voice sounded drugged. And when she looked at Nora, her eyes were bloodshot—just like Wicherly’s had been.

“The show. It’s affecting our minds. Don’t look at it, don’t listen!”

“I don’t... understand.” Viola’s eyes rolled backward in her head.

“Down on the floor! Cover your eyes and your ears!”

Nora tore a strip off her gown and blindfolded Viola. Just as she was about to blindfold herself, she caught a glimpse of a man standing in an alcove in the far corner, dressed in white tie and tails, utterly calm, an eye-mask over his face, head tilted up, hands clasped in front, standing stock-still, as if waiting. Menzies.

Another illusion?

“Fingers in your ears!” Nora cried, hunching down next to Viola.

They huddled in the corner, eyes squeezed shut, ears stopped, trying to shut out the hideous, grotesque show of death.

Chapter 65

Smithback followed Pendergast at a dead run through the emptied museum halls, the beam from the agent's flashlight licking its way along the velvet ropes. Within minutes, they had reached the rotunda, their footsteps clattering on the white marble, and seconds later, they emerged onto the grand, red-carpeted staircase before the museum. Police cars were arriving in force along Museum Drive now, sirens wailing and brakes screeching. Smithback could hear the thudding of helicopters overhead.

Many of the police were engaged in crowd control, trying to clear Museum Drive of the panicked guests, onlookers, and press. Numerous other police officers were clustered together at the foot of the great steps, where they were setting up a mobile command center. There was pushing and shoving, and a hubbub of shouting filled the air. The flashes of photographers exploded like a fireworks display.

Pendergast hesitated at the top of the stairs, then turned to Smithback. "That's the subway entrance we need," he said, pointing to the far end of Museum Drive. Their route was blocked by a seething mass of guests and onlookers.

"It's going to take twenty minutes to force our way through that crowd," Smithback said. "And for sure somebody's going to knock that beaker out of your hands along the way."

"That would be unacceptable."

A hell of an understatement, Smithback thought. "What do you plan to do about it, then?"

"We shall simply have to part the crowds."

"How?" But even as he asked the question, Smithback saw a gun appear in Pendergast's hand. "Jesus, don't tell me you're going to use that."

"I'm not going to use it. You are. I wouldn't dare fire a gun while carrying this—the proximity of the discharge could set it off."

"But I'm not going to—"

Smithback felt the gun placed in his hand. "Fire into the air, high up into the air. Aim out over Central Park."

"But I've never used this model—"

"All you need to do is pull the trigger. It's a Colt .45 Model 1911, kicks like a mule, so wrap both hands on the grip and keep your elbows slightly bent."

"Look, I'll carry the nitro."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Smithback. Now, get moving, if you please."

Reluctantly, Smithback advanced toward the crowd. "FBI!" he said unconvincingly. "Make way!"

The crowds didn't even notice him.

"Make way, damn it!"

Now some of the crowd stared back at him like a herd of cows, placid, unmoving.

"The sooner you fire, the sooner you will have their attention," Pendergast said.

"Make way!" Smithback raised the gun. "Emergency!"

A few at the front perceived what was coming, and there was a flurry of action, but the mass of the crowd between them and the subway entrance just stood there dumbly.

Bracing himself, Smithback squeezed the trigger. Nothing. He squeezed harder—and the gun went off with a terrific boom, jolting him.

A chorus of screams erupted and the crowd parted like the Red Sea.

"What the hell you think you're doing?" Two cops started running toward them from where they'd been pushing back the crowd nearby, their own guns drawn.

"FBI!" Pendergast shouted as they rushed forward into the breach. "This is an emergency federal action. Do not interfere!"

"Let's see your shield, sir!"

The back of the crowd was already coalescing and Smithback realized his mission was not yet accomplished. "Make way!" he yelled, firing the gun again while walking forward, to dramatic effect.

A series of screams, and a fresh pathway appeared almost miraculously before them.

"You crazy bastard!" somebody shouted. "Firing a gun like that!"

Smithback broke into a run, Pendergast following as quickly as he dared behind him. The cops attempted to give chase, but the crowd had already drawn together behind them. Smithback could hear the cops cursing as they tried to fight their way through.

A minute later, they'd reached the entrance to the subway, and here Pendergast went ahead, taking the stairs quickly yet with remarkable smoothness, still cradling the small flask. They trotted along the deserted platform, ducked around a corner at the far end, into the museum's subway entrance. Halfway down it, Smithback could see two figures: D'Agosta and Hayward.

"Where's our entry point?" Pendergast called out as he arrived.

"Between those lines," said Hayward, indicating two lines that had been marked on the tiles with lipstick.

Pendergast knelt and placed the flask carefully against the wall, positioning it between the lines. Then he stood and turned to face the little group. "If you would all please withdraw around the corner? My sidearm, Mr. Smithback?"

As Smithback handed the gun to the agent, he heard the sound of feet charging down the stairwell into the station. He followed Pendergast back around the corner onto the platform proper, where they crouched against the wall.

"NYPD!" came a shouted command from the far end of the station. "Drop your weapons and freeze!"

"Stay back!" Hayward shouted, waving her badge. "Police action in progress!"

"Identify yourself!"

"Captain Laura Hayward, Homicide!"

That seemed to flummox them.

Smithback saw Pendergast taking careful aim. He shrank closer to the wall.

“Stand down, Captain!” one of the policemen yelled.

“Take cover now!” came Hayward’s reply.

“Ready?” Pendergast asked quietly. “On the count of three. One...”

“I repeat, Captain, stand down!”

“Two...”

“And I repeat, you idiots: take cover!”

“Three.”

There was another gunshot, followed immediately by a terrific, earthshaking roar, and then a concussive blast that smacked Smithback hard against the chest and knocked him to the cement floor. Instantly the entire station filled with cement dust. Smithback lay on his back, dazed, the wind temporarily knocked from him. Chips of cement pattered down around him like rain.

“Holy shit!” It was D’Agosta’s voice, but the man himself was invisible in the sudden gloom.

Vaguely, Smithback could hear confused shouting from the other end of the station. He pulled himself to a sitting position, choking and spluttering, ears ringing, and felt a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Then Pendergast’s voice was in his ear.

“Mr. Smithback? We’re going in now, and I’ll need your help. Stop the show—rip out wires, rip down screens, smash lights, but stop the show. We must do that before we do anything else—even before we help the people. Do you understand?”

“Call for backup!” came the choking cry from somewhere at the far end of the platform.

“Do you understand?” Pendergast asked urgently.

Smithback coughed, nodded. The agent pulled him to his feet.

“Now!” Pendergast whispered.

They bolted around the corner, D’Agosta and Hayward at their heels. The dust had cleared just enough to show a gaping hole in the wall. From it gushed billows of fog, brilliantly illuminated by the maniacal flashing of strobe lights.

Smithback held his breath, readied himself. Then he ducked inside.

Chapter 66

Just inside the breach, they paused. The heavy mist was pouring out of the gap like water from a broken dam, filling the tunnel and the subway station beyond; within the tomb itself, it was already subsiding below eye level, allowing them to see the upper portions of the tomb. Smithback immediately recognized it, from Nora's descriptions, as the burial chamber. Strobe lights of extraordinary, even painful intensity were flashing from every corner, and an unholy rumble filled the tomb, overlaid by a throbbing, nerve-shredding, high-pitched shriek.

"What the hell is going on?" D'Agosta asked behind him.

Pendergast moved forward without answering, waving away the swirling tendrils of fog. As they approached the huge stone sarcophagus in the center of the chamber, the agent paused, looked around at the ceiling, took aim, and fired: a fixture in the corner exploded in a flash of sparks and streamers of glass. He rotated his stance, fired again, and then again, until all the strobes were dead—although flashing could still be seen coming through the doorway to the next room of the tomb, and the hideous sounds continued.

They moved forward again. Smithback felt a sudden lurch in his gut: as the fog cleared, he could see bodies on the ground, moving feebly. The floor was slick with blood.

"Oh, no." Smithback looked around wildly. "Nora!"

But it was impossible to hear anything over the maddening wall of noise that seemed to penetrate his very bones. He took a few more steps, frantically waving away the mist. Another explosion from Pendergast's gun, followed by the hollow screech of feedback and an electric arc as an audio speaker crashed to the floor. Still, the sound throbbed on, unabated. Smithback grabbed some loose wires, yanked.

A plainclothes policeman approached them, staggering as if half drunk. His face was scratched and bleeding, and his shirt was torn and hanging in strips. His shield flapped on his belt as he moved, and his service piece dangled from one hand like a forgotten appendage.

Hayward frowned in surprise. "Rogerson?" she asked.

The cop's eyes swiveled toward her briefly, then swiveled away. After a second, he turned his back on them and began staggering off. Hayward reached over and plucked the gun from the man's unresisting hand.

"What the hell happened here?" D'Agosta cried, looking around at the scattering of torn clothes, shoes, blood, and injured guests.

"There's no time to explain," Pendergast said. "Captain Hayward, you and Lieutenant D'Agosta head up to the front of the tomb. You will find most of the guests up there, clustered at the entrance. Lead them back here and out through the gap in the wall. But be careful: many of them have undoubtedly become unhinged as a result of this sound-and-light show. They may be violent. Take care not to cause a stampede." He turned to Smithback. "We must find that generator."

"The hell with that. I'm finding Nora."

"You won't be able to find anyone until we stop this infernal show."

Smithback stopped. "But—"

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

Smithback hesitated, then nodded reluctantly.

Pendergast slipped a second flashlight out of his pocket and handed it to him, and they moved forward into the fog, side by side. It was a horrifying scene of carnage—wounded were sprawled across the marble floor, groaning, and more than one body lay motionless in a grotesque, unnatural position... apparently trampled to death. The floor was littered with shards of pottery. Smithback swallowed and tried to control his wildly beating heart.

Pendergast shone his light across the ceiling, the beam finally coming to rest on a long stone molding. He aimed his gun, fired, and blew off a corner of the molding, exposing a power cable that smoked and sparked.

"They would not have been allowed to bury the cables in the walls of the tomb," he explained. "We need to search for more false moldings."

Slowly, he traced his light along the molding, which had been plastered, textured, and painted to look like stone. It ran to a corner,

where it was joined by a second molding, and from there a larger molding headed through the doorway to the adjoining room.

They picked their way over several bodies piled before the door and entered the next chamber of the tomb. Smithback winced at the blinding strobes, which Pendergast dispatched with four well-placed shots.

As the last shot reverberated through the gloom, a figure emerged from the dissipating fog, shambling, picking up and dropping its feet as if shackled with heavy weights. The mouth moved as if in violent speech, but Smithback could hear nothing over the thundering sound.

“Look out!” Smithback cried as the man abruptly lunged at Pendergast. The agent stepped aside deftly, tripping the stumbling figure and pushing him to one side. The man fell heavily to the ground and rolled, unable to get up.

They moved into a third room, Pendergast following the lines of molding with his flashlight. They appeared to all converge at a fake half-pilaster set into the far wall. Beneath stood a large XX Dynasty chest, gilded and intricately carved. It was set within a glass display case, unbroken despite the carnage.

“There!” Pendergast walked over, picked up a broken chariot wheel, and swung it into the case, shattering the glass. He stepped back and, raising his gun again, shot the ancient bronze lock off the chest. After holstering his weapon, he swept away the lock and the broken glass and lifted the lid from the heavy chest. Inside, a large generator hummed and vibrated. Pendergast slipped a knife out of his pocket, reached in, and cut a wire; the generator coughed, choked, and died—plunging the tomb into utter darkness and silence.

And yet the silence was not complete. Smithback could now hear a cacophony of cries and shrieks from the front section of the tomb: a moblike hysteria. He stood up, probing the darkness with his own flashlight.

“Nora!” he cried out. “Nora!”

Suddenly the beam of his light was arrested by a figure standing, half hidden, in a far alcove. Smithback stared in surprise. Although the man was dressed in impeccable white tie and tails, he wore a black mask over his face, and a set of headphones covered his ears. A small device that looked like a remote control was in his hand. He was standing so still Smithback wondered if perhaps he was just another

holographic projection, but then, as if on cue, he reached up and pulled off the mask.

Pendergast had been staring at the man, and the effect of his unmasking was remarkable. He stiffened and jerked, like a man who has received an electric shock. His face, normally so pale, flushed crimson.

It seemed to Smithback that the tuxedoed figure's reaction was even stronger. He went into a sudden, instinctive crouch, like a man poised to spring. Then he gathered himself together and slowly rose to his full height.

"You!" he said. For a moment, he went still again. And then—with a long, spidery hand—he removed the headphones and earplugs, and slowly and deliberately dropped them to the floor.

Fresh surprise blossomed over Smithback. He recognized this man: it was Nora's boss, Hugo Menzies. And yet he looked so different. His eyes were flaming red, his limbs quivered. His face was flushed as deeply as Pendergast's was—he was filled with rage.

Pendergast's hand went for his gun. Then he stopped, weapon half drawn, as if paralyzed.

"Diogenes..." he said in a strangled voice.

At the same time, Smithback heard his own name being called from a far corner. He looked over to see Nora staggering to her feet, supported by Viola Maskelene. Pendergast glanced over, noticing them as well.

In that moment, Menzies darted to one side with incredible speed and vanished into the darkness. Pendergast turned, tensed for pursuit—and then he turned back again toward Viola, face contorted with indecision.

Smithback dashed over to the two women and helped them to their feet. A moment later, Pendergast was beside him, taking Viola into his arms.

"Oh my God," she said, gasping and half weeping. "Oh my God, Aloysius..."

But Smithback barely heard. His arms were around Nora, one hand caressing her smudged and bloodied face. "Are you all right?" he

asked.

She winced. “A headache. A few scratches. It was so horrible.”

“We’ll get you out.” Smithback turned back to Pendergast. The agent was still holding Viola in his embrace, his hands resting on her shoulders, but again, his gaze had darted toward the darkness into which Hugo Menzies had vanished.

Behind, from the burial chamber, Smithback heard the muffled blaring of police radios. Flashlight beams lanced through the murk, and the police were there, a dozen or more uniformed officers looking confused, moving into the Hall of the Chariots, guns drawn.

“What the hell’s going on?” said the commander, a lieutenant. “What is this place?”

“You’re in the Tomb of Senef,” said Pendergast.

“What about the explosion?”

“Necessary to gain entry, Lieutenant,” said Captain Hayward, walking toward them and showing her shield. “Now, listen carefully. We have injured in here, and a lot more up ahead. We’re going to need EMTs, mobile first-aid stations, ambulances. Do you understand? Lieutenant D’Agosta is in the front of the tomb, about to escort the trapped victims back here to the exit. He needs help.”

“Understood, Captain.” The lieutenant turned to his officers and began barking orders. Several of them holstered their weapons and began moving deeper into the tomb, flashlight beams bobbing. Beyond them, Smithback could hear the approach of the crowd, the sounds of moaning, sobbing, and coughing, punctuated now and again by angry, incoherent cries. It sounded like an insane asylum on the move.

Pendergast was already helping Viola toward the exit. Smithback put his arm around Nora, and they fell in behind, headed for the gap blown in the corner of the burial chamber. Moments later, they were out of the mephitic tomb and inside the brightly lit subway station. A group of EMTs came running down the platform toward them, some carrying collapsible stretchers.

“We’ll take them, gentlemen,” one of the medical technicians said as they came up, while the rest rushed through the gap into the tomb.

In moments, Viola and Nora were strapped into stretchers and

being carried up the stairs. Pendergast led the way. The flush had gone from his face, leaving it ashen and unreadable. Smithback walked beside Nora.

She smiled and reached up to grasp his hand. "I knew you'd come," she said.

Chapter 67

We serve breakfast beginning at six, sir,” the porter said to the handsome, impeccably dressed gentleman in the private compartment.

“I would prefer to be served in my bedroom. Thank you in advance for obliging me.”

The porter glanced down at the twenty-dollar bill being pressed into his hand. “No problem, sir, not a problem at all. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. You could bring me a chilled glass, some crushed ice, a bottle of cold spring water, and a tin of sugar cubes.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll be back in a jiffy.” The man stepped out of the compartment, smiling and bowing, and shut the door with almost reverential caution.

Diogenes Pendergast watched the dwarfish man disappear down the corridor and out of sight. He heard the footsteps patter away, heard the clunk of the heavy door at the end of the railroad car. He heard the myriad sounds of Penn Station, commingled and yet disparate in his mind: the ebb and flow of conversation outside the train, the sonorous droning of the stationmaster’s announcements.

He shifted his gaze to the window, looked idly out at the platform. A landscape in shades of gray greeted him. A portly conductor stood there, patiently giving directions to a young woman, baby in her arms. A commuter trotted by, briefcase in hand, hurrying to catch the last Midtown Express to Dover on the adjoining track. An elderly woman tottered slowly by, frail and thin. She stopped to stare at the train, then at her ticket, before continuing on her precarious way.

Diogenes saw them all, yet he paid them little heed. They were simply visual ephemera, a distraction for his mind... to keep it from drifting toward other, more maddening thoughts.

After the first few minutes—moments of anguish, disbelief, and white-hot rage—he had more or less managed to keep the thought of his failure at arm’s length. The fact was, under the circumstances he

had managed quite well: he always had multiple exit plans in place, and this evening he'd followed the most appropriate one to the letter. Barely half an hour had passed since he'd fled the museum. And yet already he was safely aboard the Lake Champlain, the overnight Amtrak train to Montreal. It was an ideal train for his purposes: it stopped at Cold Spring, on the Hudson, to change from electric to diesel, and all passengers were given thirty minutes to stretch their legs.

Diogenes would use the time to pay a final visit to his old friend Margo Green.

The hypo was already filled and lovingly nestled in its gift box, beautifully wrapped and beribboned. It was tucked safely away in his valise along with his most precious items—his scrapbooks, his personal pharmacopoeia of hallucinogens and opioids, his ghastly little trinkets and playthings of which nobody who'd ever caught sight had been permitted to live—all stowed in the overhead compartment. Enough clothing and disguises to get him safely home were hanging in the garment bag inside the small closet by the door. And safely tucked into his pocket were his documents and passports.

Now all that remained was to think as little as possible about what had happened. He did this by turning again, contemplatively, to Margo Green.

In his exhaustive, disciplined preparations for the sound-and-light show, she was the one indulgence he allowed himself. She was the only carryover from the earlier stage of his plan. Unlike the others, she was a sitting duck, to be played with and dispatched with little risk, time, or effort.

What about her, in particular, had drawn him back—more than, say, William Smithback, Nora Kelly, Vincent D'Agosta, or Laura Hayward? He wasn't sure, but he guessed it was her long connection to the museum—to the pontificating, pedestrian, whoreson, didactic, beggarly, jejune, ossified, shit-encrusted minds amongst whom he had been buried—as Hugo Menzies—for more years than he cared to count. It had been an insufferably extended torture. The whole lot of them would have been dispatched by the sound-and-light show—except for her. He had failed with the others, but he would not fail with her.

It had pleased him to pay her frequent sympathetic visits in her comatose state—which he had been at pains to extend, keeping her on

the brink of expiration, teasing out her widowed mother's pain to the greatest possible extent. It was a brew of suffering from which he drank deep, and whose astringent taste renewed his own thirst for the living death that was his life.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Diogenes said.

The porter entered rolling a portable bar, which he set up on an adjoining table. "Anything else, sir?"

"Not at the moment. You may make up my bed in an hour."

"Very good, sir. I'll get your breakfast order then." The man retreated with another deferential bow.

Diogenes sat for a moment, once again glancing out at the platform. Then, slowly, he drew a silver flask from his breast pocket. Opening it, he poured several ounces of a brilliant green liquid—which to him looked pale gray—into the glass on the portable bar. Then he retrieved a spoon from his leather valise: a silver spoon with the Pendergast family crest stamped on its handle, somewhat melted at one corner. He handled it as one might handle one's newborn child. Carefully, lovingly, he laid the spoon across the top of the glass and placed a sugar cube inside it. Then, taking the chilled water, he poured it onto the cube, drop by drop. Spilling over the edges of the spoon like a sugary fountain, the sweetened water fell into the liqueur below, turning it first a milky green, then a beautiful opalescent jade—if his eyes could only see in color.

All of this was done without the slightest trace of hurry.

Diogenes put the spoon carefully aside and lifted the glass to his lips, savoring the faintly bitter taste. He screwed the cap back on the flask and returned it to his pocket. It was the only modern absinthe he had found that had the same high proportion of essences of wormwood as the old nineteenth-century brands. As such, it deserved to be drunk in the traditional manner.

He took another sip, settling back comfortably into the chair. What was it Oscar Wilde had said of drinking absinthe? "The first stage is like ordinary drinking, the second when you begin to see monstrous and cruel things, but if you can persevere you will enter in upon the third stage, where you see things that you want to see, wonderful curious things."

Strange how, no matter how much he drank, Diogenes never seemed to get past the second stage—nor did he particularly care to.

A small speaker set high up in the wall came to life.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the conductor speaking. Welcome aboard the Lake Champlain, making stops at Yonkers, Cold Spring, Poughkeepsie, Albany, Saratoga Springs, Plattsburg, St.-Lambert, and Montreal. This is your final boarding call. All visitors, please exit the train at this time...

Listening, Diogenes smiled faintly. The Lake Champlain was one of only two luxury passenger trains still operated by Amtrak. By taking two adjoining first-class bedrooms and having the partition between them unlocked, Diogenes had secured himself a passably comfortable suite. It was a criminal disgrace the way politicians had allowed America's passenger train system, once the envy of the world, to fall into insolvency and disrepair. But this, too, was but a passing inconvenience: he would soon be back in Europe, where people understood how to travel in dignity and comfort.

Outside the window, a heavysset woman wobbled quickly by, a porter burdened down with suitcases trotting in her wake. Diogenes held up his glass, stirring the pearly liquid gently. The train would depart within moments. And now for the first time—cautiously, like a man approaching a dangerous animal—he allowed himself a brief moment of reflection.

It was almost too dreadful to contemplate. Fifteen years of planning, careful disguise, artful intrigue, ingenious contrivance... all for naught. The thought of all the work and time he had put into Menzies alone—fashioning his backstory, learning his trade, obtaining employment, working for years and years, attending vapid meetings and listening to the asinine mutterings of desiccated curators—was almost enough to send him spiraling into a pit of madness. And then there was the final extravaganza, in all its intricate and fearsome glory: the meticulous medical research into how one could contrive to transform ordinary people into murderous sociopaths using nothing more than sound and light—the ablation of the inhibitory cerebral pathway by laser light, traumatizing the entorhinal cortex and amygdala and allowing for disinhibition of rudimentary function... And then, there had been the painstaking implementation of his own special sound-and-light show hidden within the multimedia presentation everybody else had slaved over—and the testing of it on the technician and that ass, Wicherly...

It had all been so perfect. Even the tomb's curse, which he'd exploited so beautifully, added an exquisite touch: softening people up, preparing them psychologically for the terror of his sound-and-light show. It would have worked. In fact, it did work—except for the one element he could never have predicted: his brother escaping from Herkmoor. How had he managed that? And then he had appeared on the scene just in time to once again ruin everything.

How very like Aloysius. Aloysius, who—as the less gifted brother—had always taken grim pleasure in tearing down those things he himself lovingly constructed. Aloysius who, realizing he would always be bested intellectually, had taken the ultimate step of subjecting him to an Event that would ensure...

But here the hand holding the glass began to shake, and Diogenes immediately shut down this line of thought. Never mind: he would leave his brother one more gift for the delectation of his conscience: the gruesome death of Margo Green.

There was a hiss of brakes; another announcement from the conductor; and then, with a squealing of metal wheels, the train began to creep forward along the platform. He was on his way: Cold Spring, Canada, Europe, and home.

Home. Just the thought of being back in his library, among his treasured possessions, within the embrace of a structure lovingly designed to spoil his every whim, helped restore his equanimity. It was from home that, over many years, he'd planned his perfect crime. From there he could do it again. He was still relatively young. He had many years left, more than enough to develop a plan—a better plan.

He took a deeper sip of absinthe. In his rage and shock, he was forgetting something. He had succeeded, at least in part. He had hurt his brother terribly. Aloysius had been publicly humiliated, charged with the murders of his own friends, sent to prison. He might be free, temporarily, but he was still a wanted man: the prison break would only deepen the hole he was in. He could never rest, never take an easy breath. He would be hunted endlessly. For somebody so private, the prison ordeal must have been mortifying.

Yes, he had accomplished much. He had struck his brother in a most vital, most sensitive spot. While Aloysius had been languishing in prison, he had seduced his brother's ward. What an abominable, delicious pleasure it had been. Remarkable: a hundred years of childhood... and yet still so fresh, so innocent and naive. Every web

he had spun, every cynical lie he had told, had been a joy: especially his long and windy disquisitions on color. She would be dead by now, lying in a pool of her own blood. Yes, murder was one thing: but suicide, genuine suicide, struck the hardest blow of all.

He took another slow sip and watched the platform glide by over the rim of the glass. He was approaching Oscar Wilde's second stage of absinthe drinking, the contemplation of monstrous and cruel things—and he wanted to hold in his mind, like a soothing balm, one particular image: his brother standing over the dead body of Constance, reading the letter. This was the image that would comfort, nourish, and sustain him until he reached home...

The door to his stateroom rolled back with a clatter. Diogenes sat up, smoothing his shirtfront and slipping a hand into his jacket pocket for the ticket. But it was not the conductor who stood in the corridor beyond: it was the frail old woman he had seen walk past on the platform a few minutes earlier.

He frowned. "This is a private room," he said in a clipped tone.

The woman did not answer. Instead, she took a step forward into the compartment.

Instantly, Diogenes grew alarmed. It was nothing he could immediately put his finger on, but some sixth sense abruptly screamed danger. And then, as the woman reached into her handbag, he realized what it was: these were no longer the slow, hesitant movements of an old lady. They were lithe and quick—and they seemed to have a dreadful purpose. But before he could move, the hand came out of the bag holding a gun.

Diogenes froze. The gun was ancient, practically a relic: dirty, webbed with rust. Almost against his will, Diogenes found his eyes traveling up the woman's form until they reached her face—and he recognized the bottomless, expressionless eyes that looked back at him from beneath the wig. Recognized them well.

The barrel rose toward him.

Diogenes leaped to his feet, absinthe sloshing over his shirt and spattering the front of his pants, and flung himself backward as she squeezed the trigger.

Nothing.

Diogenes straightened, heart beating madly. It dawned on him that she had never fired a weapon before—she did not know how to aim, she had not yet turned off the safety. He sprang at her, but even as he did so, he heard the click of a safety being released, and a shattering explosion filled the compartment. A bullet punched a hole in the skin of the train car above his head as he twisted and fell sideways.

He scrambled to his feet as the woman took a step forward, wraithlike in the billows of cordite and dust. Once again—with perfect, terrible composure—she leveled the gun, took aim.

Diogenes threw himself at the door to the adjoining compartment, only to find that the porter had not yet unlocked it.

Another deafening explosion, and splinters flew from the molding mere inches from his ear.

He turned around to face her, his back against the window. Perhaps he could rush her, knock her from the door... But once again, with a deliberation so slow it was unspeakably awful, she leveled the old pistol, took aim.

He jerked to one side as a third bullet shattered the window where just a moment before he had been standing. As the echoes of the shot died away, the clank of the train wheels drifted in. There were shouts and screams in the corridor of the train now. Outside, the end of the platform was in sight. Even if he overcame her, wrestled away the gun—it would be all over. He would be caught, exposed.

Instantly, without conscious thought, Diogenes whirled around and dived out through the shattered window, landing heavily on the concrete platform and rolling once, twice, a confused welter of dust amidst bits of safety glass. He picked himself up, half dazed, heart beating madly, just in time to see the last car of the train disappear beyond the platform and into the dark mouth of the tunnel.

He stood there, stunned. And yet, through his daze, through his shock and pain and fear, an image persisted: the terrible calm with which she—Constance—had corrected her aim. There had been a lack of emotion, expression, anything, in those strange eyes...

Except utter conviction.

Chapter 68

Anyone observing the gentleman going through security at terminal E in Boston's Logan Airport would have noticed a dapper man in his mid-sixties, with brown hair graying at the temples, a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, wearing a blue blazer with a white shirt open at the collar and a red silk handkerchief poking from his breast pocket. His eyes were a sparkling blue, his cheekbones broad, and his face open, ruddy, and cheerful. A black cashmere overcoat was slung over his arm, and he laid it on the security belt along with his shoes and watch.

Past security, the gentleman strode vigorously down the terminal corridor, pausing only at a Borders near gate 7. He ducked inside, perused the shelves of thrillers, and was delighted to find that a new James Rollins had been published. He took up the book, plucked a Times from the rack, and brought them to the cashier, greeting her with a cheery "Good day," betraying in accent and diction his Australian origins.

The gentleman then chose a seat near the gate, seated himself, and unfolded the paper with a snap. He took in the world and national news, turning the pages with a crisp, practiced motion. In the New York Report, his notice fell on a small item: Mysterious Shooting on Amtrak Train.

A sweep of his eyes took in the salient details: a man had been shot at on the Lake Champlain out of Penn Station; witnesses described the shooter as an elderly woman; the would-be target threw himself off the train and disappeared in the tunnels underneath Penn Station; a thorough search failed to identify the assailant or recover the weapon. The police were still investigating.

He turned the page and scanned the editorials, a slight frown gathering over some point he apparently disagreed with, soon clearing up.

A meticulous observer—and, in fact, there was one—would have seen nothing more remarkable than a wealthy Australian reading the Times while waiting for his flight. But the pleasant, somewhat vacant expression on his face was no more than skin-deep. Inside, his head was a boiling stew of fury, disbelief, and savage self-reproach. His

world was upended, his careful planning destroyed. Nothing had succeeded. The Doorway to Hell: ruined. Margo Green: still alive. His brother: free. And most unacceptable of all: Constance Greene, undead.

Smiling, he turned to the sports section.

Constance, unsuicided. With her, he had miscalculated disastrously. Everything he knew of human nature indicated that she would take her own life. She was a freak, mentally unstable—hadn't she been stumbling blindfolded along the cliff's edge of sanity for decades? He had given her a push—a hard shove. Why hadn't she fallen? He had destroyed every pillar in her life, every support she had—undermined her every belief. He had drowned her existence with nihilism.

With rude haste the bloomy girl deflow'r'd,

Tender, defenceless, and with ease o'erpower'd.

In her long, sheltered, uneventful life, Constance had always drifted hesitantly, uncertain what she was intended for, confused about the meaning of her life. With bitter clarity, Diogenes now saw that he had cleared up her confusion and given her the one thing no one else could have: something to live for. She had found a new, shining purpose in life.

To kill him.

Normally, this would not be a problem. Those who interfered with him—there had been several—hadn't survived long enough to make a second attempt. He had washed away his sins in their blood. But already he could see that she was not like the others. He could not understand how she had identified him on the train—unless she had somehow physically followed him from the museum. And he was still unnerved from the utter self-possession of mind with which she had shot at him. She had forced him to leap out a window, flee in undignified panic, abandoning his valise with its treasured contents.

Fortunately, he had retained his various passports, wallet, credit cards, and identifications. The police would trace the valise and luggage back to Menzies; but they could not identify his traveling alter ego from them: Mr. Gerald Boscomb of South Penrith, Sydney, NSW. Now it was time to put aside all extraneous thoughts, all the little voluntary and involuntary mental tics and flourishes and whispered voices that made up his internal landscape—and identify a plan of

action.

Closing the sports section, he turned to business.

No thought of right and wrong—only her fury

With all her being speeded toward revenge.

Constance Greene alone could identify him. She was an unacceptable danger. As long as she pursued him, he could not retreat to his bolt-hole and regroup. And yet all was not lost. He had failed this time, at least in part, but he had many years of life left to establish and execute a new plan, and he would not fail a second time.

But as long as she lived, he would never be safe.

Constance Greene had to die.

Mr. Gerald Boscomb picked up the novel he'd purchased, cracked it, and began reading.

Killing her would require a finely tuned plan. His thoughts turned to the Cape buffalo—the most dangerous animal hunted by man. The Cape buffalo employed a peculiar strategy when hunted: alone among animals, it knew how to turn the hunter into the hunted.

As he read, a plan formed in his mind. He thought it over, considered various locations for its execution, and discarded each in turn, before arriving—at chapter 6—at the perfect setting. The plan would work. He would turn Constance's very hatred for him against her.

He placed a bookmark in the novel, shut it, and tucked it under his arm. The first part of the plan was to show himself to her, to be intentionally seen—if she had managed to follow him here. But he could take no more chances, make no more assumptions.

He rose, slung his coat over his arm, and strolled down the terminal, glancing casually left and right, observing the masses of humanity as they ebbed and flowed on their futile business, a tidal flow of grays and more grays: layers of gray, an infinitude of gray. As he passed the Borders once again, his eye paused fleetingly on a dowdy woman buying a copy of Vogue; she was dressed in a brown woolen skirt of African design with a white shirt, a cheap scarf wrapped around her neck. Her brown, unwashed hair fell limply to her shoulders. She carried a small black leather backpack.

Diogenes passed slowly by the bookstore and went into the Starbucks next door, shocked that Constance had made such a poor effort to disguise herself. Shocked, also, that she had managed to follow him.

Or had she?

She must have. To find him any other way would take a mind reader.

He purchased a small organic green tea and croissant and made his way back to his seat, taking care not to look at the woman again. He could kill her here—it would be easy—but he would not be able to escape the layers of airport security. Would she make an attempt on his life in this exposed place? Did she care enough about her own life to take greater care—or was her sole aim to end his?

He had no answer.

Mr. Gerald Boscomb finished his tea and croissant, brushed the crumbs off the tips of his fingers, dusted his coat, and resumed reading his newly acquired thriller. A moment later, the first-class cabin of his flight was called to board. As he proffered his boarding pass to the gate attendant, his eye swept the terminal aisle again, but the woman had disappeared.

“G’day,” he said cheerily, as he took the ticket stub and entered the jetway.

Chapter 69

Vincent D'Agosta entered the library of 891 Riverside Drive, pausing in the doorway. A fire blazed on the hearth, the lights were up, and the room was a hive of concentrated activity. The chairs had been pushed back against the bookcases, and a large table covered with papers dominated the center of the room. Proctor was at one side, murmuring into a cordless phone, while Wren, his hair even wilder than usual, pored over a stack of books at a desk in the corner. The little man looked pinched and ancient.

"Vincent. Please come in." Pendergast called D'Agosta over with a curt gesture.

D'Agosta complied, shocked at the agent's uncharacteristically haggard appearance. It was the only time he remembered ever seeing Pendergast unshaven. And, for once, the man's suit jacket was unbuttoned.

"I got the details you wanted," D'Agosta said, holding up a manila folder. "Thanks to Captain Hayward." He dropped it on the table, flipped it open.

"Proceed."

"Witnesses say the shooter was an old woman. She got on the train with a first-class ticket to Yonkers, paid in cash. Gave the name Jane Smith." He snorted. "Just as the train was pulling out of Penn Station, while it was still underground, she entered the first-class berth of a passenger named... Eugene Hofstadter. Pulled a gun and fired four shots. Forensics recovered two .44-40 rounds embedded in the walls and another on the tracks outside. Get this: they were antique rounds—probably shot from a nineteenth-century revolver, a Colt perhaps."

Pendergast turned to Wren. "Check to see if we're missing a Colt Peacemaker or similar revolver from the collection, along with any .44-40 rounds, please."

Wordlessly, Wren stood up and left the room. Pendergast glanced back at D'Agosta. "Go on."

“The old woman vanished, although no one saw her get off the train, which was sealed almost immediately following the shooting. If she was wearing a disguise and discarded it, it was never found.”

“Did the man leave anything behind?”

“You bet: a valise and a garment bag full of clothes. No papers or documents, or even a clue to his true identity. All labels had been carefully razored off the clothing. But the valise...”

“Yes?”

“They brought it into the evidence room, and when the warrant came down, they opened it up. Apparently, the evidence officer took one look and, well, whatever happened next he had to be sedated. A hazmat team was called in, and the stuff is now under lock and key—nobody seems to know where.”

“I see.”

“I guess we’re talking about Diogenes here,” said D’Agosta, slightly annoyed that he’d been sent out on the assignment with less-than-complete information.

“That is correct.”

“So who’s this old lady who shot at him?”

The agent gestured toward the table at the center of the room. “When Proctor returned here last night, he found Constance missing, along with a few articles of clothing. In her room, he found her pet mouse, its neck broken. Along with that note and the rosewood box.”

D’Agosta walked over, picked up the indicated note, read it quickly. “Jesus. Oh, Jesus, what a sick fuck...”

“Open the box.”

He opened the small antique box a little gingerly. It was empty, a long dimple left in the purple velvet interior by some object, now gone. A faded label on the inside cover read Sweitzer Surgical Instrument Company.

“A scalpel?” he asked.

“Yes. For Constance to cut her wrists with. She seems to have taken it for another purpose.”

D'Agosta nodded. "I think I'm getting the picture. The old woman was Constance."

"Yes."

"I hope she succeeds."

"The thought of their meeting again is too terrible to contemplate," Pendergast replied, his face grim. "I must catch up with her—and stop her. Diogenes has been preparing for this escape for years, and we have no hope of tracing him... unless, of course, he wishes to be traced. Constance, on the other hand, will not be trying to conceal her tracks. I must follow her... and there is always a chance that, in finding her, I will find him as well."

He turned to an iBook sitting open on the table, began typing. A few minutes later, he looked over. "Constance boarded a flight to Florence, Italy, at five o'clock this afternoon, out of Logan Airport in Boston." He turned. "Proctor? Pack my things and book a ticket to Florence, if you please."

"I'm coming with you," said D'Agosta.

Pendergast looked back at him, his face gray. "You may accompany me to the airport. But as for going with me—no, Vincent, you will not. You have a disciplinary hearing to prepare for. Besides, this is a... family matter."

"I can help you," said D'Agosta. "You need me."

"Everything you say is true. And yet I must, and I will, do this alone."

His tone was so cold and final that D'Agosta realized any reply was useless.

Chapter 70

Diogenes Pendergast, a.k.a. Mr. Gerald Boscomb, passed the Palazzo Antinori and turned into the Via Tornabuoni, breathing in the damp winter air of Florence with a certain bitter nostalgia. So much had happened since he was last here, mere months ago, when he had been filled with plans. Now he had nothing—not even his clothes, which he had abandoned on the train.

Not even his treasured valise.

He strolled pass Max Mara, remembering with regret when it was once the fine old Libreria Seeber. He stopped in at Pineider, bought some stationery, purchased luggage at Beltrami, and picked up a raincoat and umbrella at Allegri—all of which he had sent over to his hotel, keeping only the raincoat and umbrella, for which he had paid cash. He stopped at Procacci, settled himself at a tiny table in the crowded shop, and ordered a truffle sandwich with a glass of vernaccia. He sipped his drink thoughtfully, watching passersby through the window.

Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves

Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant

The sky was threatening rain, the city dark and narrow. Perhaps that was why he had always liked Florence in winter—it was monochromatic, the buildings pale, the surrounding hills gray humps spiked with cypress trees, the river a sluggish ripple of dull iron, its bridges almost black.

He dropped a bill on the table and left the café, continuing his stroll down the street. He paused to examine the display window at Valentino, using the reflection of the glass to observe the other side of the street. He went inside and purchased two suits, one in silk and the other a black double-breasted completo with a broad pinstripe, which he favored because of its faint thirties gangsterish flavor—and had them, as well, sent to his hotel.

Back on the street, he turned his footsteps toward the grim medieval facade of the Palazzo Ferroni, an imposing castle of dressed stone with towers and crenellated battlements, now the world

headquarters of Ferragamo. He crossed the small piazza in front of the castle, past the Roman column of gray marble. Just before he entered the castle proper, a swift, sidelong glance identified the dowdy woman with brown hair—her—just at that moment entering the church of Santa Trinità.

Satisfied, he entered Ferragamo and spent a good deal of time looking over shoes, buying two pairs, and then completing his wardrobe with purchases of underwear, socks, nightshirt, undershirts, and bathing suit. As before, he sent his purchases over to his hotel and exited the store, encumbered with nothing more than the furled umbrella and the raincoat.

He walked toward the river and paused along the lungarno, contemplating the perfect curve of the arches of the Ponte Santa Trinità, designed by Ammanati: curves that had confounded the mathematicians. His yellowed eye examined the statues of the four seasons that crowned both ends.

None of it gave him pleasure anymore. It was all useless, futile.

The Arno below, swollen by winter rains, shuddered along like the back of a snake, and he could hear the roar of water going over the pescaia a few hundred yards downriver. He felt a faint raindrop on his cheek, then another. Black umbrellas immediately began appearing among the bustling crowds, and they bobbed over the bridge like so many black lanterns...

e dietro le venìa'sì lunga tratta
di gente, ch'i' non avereì creduto
che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta.

He put on his own raincoat, belted it tightly, unfurled the umbrella, and experienced a certain nihilistic frisson as he joined the crowds crossing the bridge. On the far side, he paused at the embankment, looking back over the river. He could hear the tick-tick of raindrops on the fabric of the umbrella. He could not see her, but he knew she was there, somewhere under that moving sea of umbrellas, following him.

He turned and strolled across the small piazza at the far end of the bridge, then took a right on Via Santo Spirito and an immediate left onto Borgo Tegolaio. There he paused to look in the rear display window of one of the fine antique shops that fronted on Via Maggio,

stuffed with gilt candlesticks, old silver saltcellars, and dark still lifes.

He waited until he was sure that she had observed him—he caught just a glimpse of her through a double reflection in the shop window. She was carrying a Max Mara bag, and for all the world looked like one of the swinish American tourists who visited Florence in mindless shopping herds.

Constance Greene, just where he wanted her.

The rain slackened. He furled his umbrella but remained at the shop window, examining the objects with apparent interest. He watched her distant, almost unreadable reflection, waiting for her to move forward into the sea of umbrellas and thus lose sight of him for a moment.

As soon as she did so, he burst into a run, sprinting silently up Borgo Tegolaio, his raincoat flying behind him. He ducked across the street and darted into a narrow alley, Sdrucchiolo de' Pitti; tore along its length; then took another left, racing down Via Toscanella. Then he ran across a small piazza and continued down Via dello Sprone until he had made a complete circuit and come back around to Via Santo Spirito, some fifty yards below the antique shop where he had dallied moments earlier.

He paused just short of the intersection with Via Santo Spirito, catching his breath.

Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves

In a field

He forced his mind back to business, angry at the whispered voice that never gave him peace. When she saw he was no longer on the street, she would assume—she would have to assume—that he had taken a right turn down the tiny alley just beyond the antique shop: Via dei Coverelli. She would think him ahead of her, walking in the opposite direction toward her. But, like the Cape buffalo, he was now behind her, their positions reversed.

Diogenes knew Via dei Coverelli well. It was one of the darkest, narrowest streets in Florence. The medieval buildings on both sides had been built out over the street on arches of stone, which blocked the sky and made the alley, even on a sunny day, as dim as a cave. The alley made a peculiar dogleg as it wormed past the back of the Santo Spirito church, two ninety-degree turns, before joining Via

Santo Spirito.

Diogenes trusted in Constance's intelligence and her uncanny research abilities. He knew she would have studied a map of Florence and considered deeply the momento giusto in which to launch her attack on him. He felt sure that she would see the Coverelli alleyway as an ideal point of ambush. If he had turned down Coverelli, as she must believe, then this would be her chance. All she had to do was backtrack, enter Coverelli from the other end, and then wait in the crook of the dogleg for Diogenes to arrive. A person lurking in that dark angle could not be seen from either opening of the alleyway.

All this Diogenes had already thought out, the day before, on the plane ride to Italy.

She did not know that he had already anticipated her every action. She did not know that his flanking dash in the other direction would turn the tables. He would now be approaching her from behind, instead of from the front.

The hunter is now the hunted.

Chapter 71

The Rolls tore across the upper deck of the Triborough Bridge, the skyline of Manhattan rising to the south, slumbering in the predawn. Proctor drove effortlessly through the traffic—heavy even at 4:00 A.M.—leaving drivers in his wake, their angry horns Doppler-shifting downward as he passed.

Pendergast sat in the back, in disguise as an investment banker on a business trip to Florence, equipped with the appropriate documents supplied by Glinn. Next to him sat D’Agosta, silent and grim.

“I don’t get it,” D’Agosta said at last. “I just don’t understand how Diogenes could call this a perfect crime.”

“I do understand—and rather too late,” Pendergast replied bitterly. “It’s as I explained on the ride to the museum last night. Diogenes wanted to inflict on the world the pain that had been inflicted on him. He wanted to re-create the... the terrible Event that ruined his life. You recall I mentioned he had been victimized by a sadistic device, a ‘house of pain’? The Tomb of Senef was nothing less than a re-creation of that house of pain. On a grand and terrible scale.”

The Rolls slowed for the tollbooth, then accelerated again.

“So what was going on in the tomb, then? What happened to all those people?”

“I’m not yet sure precisely. But did you notice that some of the victims were walking with a peculiar, shuffling gait? It put me in mind of the neurological effect known as drop foot, which sometimes afflicts people suffering from brain inflammation. Their ability to walk is impaired in a very specific manner, making it difficult to lower their feet smoothly to the ground. And if you ask Captain Hayward to inspect the tomb, I feel certain she will find powerful lasers hidden among the strobe lights. Not to mention a superfluity of fog machines and subwoofers far beyond anything the original design called for. It seems Diogenes engineered a combination of strobe light, laser, and sound to induce lesions in a very particular part of the brain. The flashing lasers and sound overwhelmed the ventromedial cortex of the brain, which inhibits violent and atavistic behavior. Victims would

lose all inhibition, all sense of restraint, prey to every passing impulse. The id unleashed.”

“It’s hard to believe that light and sound could actually cause brain damage.”

“Any neurologist will tell you that extreme fear, pain, stress, or anger can damage the human brain, kill brain cells. Post-traumatic stress disorder in its extreme form does, in fact, cause brain damage. Diogenes simply brought that to its ultimate conclusion.”

“It was a setup from the very beginning.”

“Yes. There was no Count of Cahors. Diogenes fronted the money for the restoration of the tomb. And the ancient curse itself provided just the kind of flourish that Diogenes delights in. Clearly, he secretly installed his own version of the show, a hidden version unknown to the technicians and programmers. He tested it first on Jay Lipper, then on the Egyptologist, Wicherly. And recall, Vincent, his ultimate aim was not just the people in the tomb: a live feed was going out over public television. Millions could have been affected.”

“Unbelievable.”

Pendergast bowed his head. “No. Utterly logical. His aim was to re-create the terrible, unforgivable Event... for which I was responsible.”

“Don’t start blaming yourself.”

Pendergast looked up again, the silvery eyes suddenly dark in his bruised face. He spoke in a low voice, almost as if he were talking to himself. “I am my brother’s creator. And all this time, I never knew it—I never apologized or atoned for what I did. That is something I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life.”

“Forgive me for saying it, but that’s a load of crap. I don’t know much about it, but I do know what happened to Diogenes was an accident.”

Pendergast went on, voice even lower, almost as if he hadn’t heard. “Diogenes’s entire reason for existence is I. And, perhaps, my reason for existence is him.”

The Rolls entered JFK Airport and drove along the circulation ramp toward terminal 8. As it pulled up to the curb, Pendergast

leaped out and D'Agosta followed.

Pendergast hefted his suitcase, grasped D'Agosta's hand. "Good luck on the hearing, Vincent. If I don't return, Proctor will handle my affairs."

D'Agosta swallowed. "Speaking of returning, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Yes?"

"It's... a difficult question."

Pendergast paused. "What is it?"

"You realize there's only one way to take care of Diogenes."

Pendergast's silvery eyes hardened.

"You know what I'm talking about, right?"

Still, Pendergast said nothing, but the look in his eyes was so cold that D'Agosta almost had to look away.

"When the moment comes, if you hesitate... he won't. So I need to know if you'll be able to..." D'Agosta couldn't finish the sentence.

"And your question, Vincent?" came the icy reply.

D'Agosta looked back at him, saying nothing. After a beat, Pendergast turned abruptly and disappeared into the terminal.

Chapter 72

Diogenes Pendergast strolled around the corner of the Via dello Sprone and back into Via Santo Spirito. Constance Greene was gone, having ducked into the Via dei Coverelli as he'd anticipated. And now she would be waiting for him, in ambush, to round the corner.

To confirm this, he walked briskly down Via Santo Spirito and paused just before the entrance to Coverelli, flattening himself against the ancient sgraffito facade of some long-forgotten palace. With enormous caution, he peered around the corner.

Excellent. She was still not to be seen—she had already turned the first angle of the dogleg and was no doubt waiting for him to come from the opposite direction.

His hand slipped into his pocket and removed a leather case, from which he took an ivory-handled scalpel identical to the one he had left beneath her pillow. The cool weight of it comforted him. Counting out the seconds, he opened his umbrella and made the turn. Then he began walking boldly down Via dei Coverelli, his shoes echoing on the cobblestones in the confined alleyway, his upper body hidden beneath the black umbrella. Disguise was unnecessary: she would not look back around the corner to see who was coming from the other direction. She would not expect his approach from that side.

He strode on boldly, inhaling the scent of urine and dog feces, of vomit and wet stone—the ancient alleyway retained even the smell of medieval Florence. Keeping the scalpel poised in his gloved hand, he approached the first corner of the dogleg. As he did so, he previsualized his strike. She would have her back to him; he would come up from the side, grab her neck with his left arm while aiming the scalpel for that sweet spot just below the right clavicle; the length of the scalpel blade would be sufficient to sever the brachiocephalic artery at the point where it divided into the carotid and subclavian arteries. She would not even have time to cry out. He would then hold her while she died; he would cradle her; he would allow her blood to flow over him as it had done once before... under very different circumstances...

... and then he would leave both her and his raincoat in the alley.

He approached the corner. Fifteen feet, ten, eight, now...

He turned the corner and paused, tense and then astonished. There was no one there. The dogleg was empty.

He quickly looked around, forward and back: no one. And now he was in the dogleg, blind, unable to see who was coming from either direction.

He felt a twinge of panic. Somewhere he had miscalculated. Where had she gone? Had she tricked him in some way? It didn't seem possible.

He paused, realizing that he was now stuck in the blind spot. If he walked around the corner ahead of him, out into Borgo Tegolaio, a much broader and more visible street, and she was there, she would see him—and all his advantage would be lost. On the other hand, if she was behind him, and he went back, that would also destroy his advantage.

He stood motionless, thinking furiously. The sky continued to darken, and now he realized that it wasn't merely the rain, but the evening was falling like a dead hand over the city. He couldn't stay there forever: he would have to move, to turn either one corner or the other.

Despite the chill, he felt himself growing warm under the raincoat. He had to abandon his plan, turn around, and walk back the way he had come—to unwind, so to speak, his flanking maneuver as if it had never happened. That would be best. Something had happened. She had taken another turn somewhere and he had lost her—that was it. He would then have to think of another attack. Perhaps he should go to Rome and allow her to follow him into the Catacombs of St. Callixtus. That popular tourist site, with its anonymous dead ends and doubling-backs, would be an excellent place to kill her.

He turned and walked back along Via dei Coverelli, cautiously rounding the first dogleg. The alleyway was empty. He strode down it—and then suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of movement from one of the archways above; he instinctively threw himself sideways even as a shadow dropped upon him and he felt the resistless swipe of a scalpel cutting through the layers of his raincoat and suit, followed by the searing burn of cut flesh.

With a cry, he twisted around and—even as he fell—drove his own scalpel in a glittering arc toward her, aiming for the neck. His

greater experience with the blade, combined with superior speed, paid off as his scalpel met flesh in a mist of blood; but as he continued to fall, he realized she had twisted her head at the last moment and his blade, instead of cutting her throat, had merely slashed the side of her head.

He fell hard onto the cobblestones, his mind swept clean by astonishment, rolled over, and leaped up, scalpel in hand—but she was already gone, vanished.

In that moment, he understood her plan. Her poor disguise had been no accident. She had been showing herself to him, just as he had been revealing himself to her. She had allowed him to lead her to a point of ambush, and she had then used it against him. She had countered his countermove.

The simple brilliance of it astounded him.

He stood there, looking up at the crowded stone arches above him. He made out the crumbling ledge of pietra serena from which she had no doubt launched her attack. Far above he could see the tiniest sliver of steel-gray sky, out of which were spinning raindrops.

He took a step, staggered.

He felt a wave of faintness as the burning sensation in his side increased. He dared not open his coat and inspect; he could not afford to get blood on the outside of his clothing—it would draw attention. He belted his raincoat as tightly as possible, trying to bind the wound.

Blood would draw attention.

As the feeling of faintness receded and his brain emerged from the shock of the attack, he realized that an opening had presented itself to him. He had cut her head, and no doubt it was bleeding copiously, as all such cuts did. She could not hide such a cut and the blood, not even with a scarf. She could not pursue him around Florence with blood pouring down her face. She would have to retreat somewhere, clean herself up. And that gave him the window of opportunity he needed to escape from her, to shake her off—forever.

Now was the moment. If he could escape from her cleanly, he could assume another identity, and from there proceed to his final destination. She would never find him there—never.

He strolled as casually as possible through the streets toward the

taxi stand at the end of Borgo San Jacopo. As he walked, he could feel the blood soaking through his clothes, trickling down his leg. The pain was minor, and he was sure the cut had merely sliced along his rib cage without penetrating his vitals.

He had to do something about the blood, however—and fast.

He turned into a little café at the corner of Tegolaio and Santo Spirito, went up to the bar, and ordered an espresso and a spremuta. He downed both, one after the other, dropped a five-euro bill on the zinc, and went into the bathroom. He locked the door and opened his raincoat. The amount of blood was shocking. He quickly probed the wound, confirming that it hadn't pierced his peritoneum. Using paper towels, he mopped up as much blood as he could; and then, tearing away the lower half of his blood-soaked shirt, he tied the strips around his torso, closing the wound and stanching the flow of blood. Then he washed his hands and face, put on his raincoat, combed his hair, and left.

He felt the blood pooling now into his shoe, and he looked down to see that his heel was leaving a bloody quarter-moon on the sidewalk. But it was not fresh blood, and he could sense that the bleeding had slowed. A few more steps and he arrived at the taxi stand, slid into the backseat of a Fiat.

“Speak English, mate?” he asked, smiling.

“Yes,” came the gruff reply.

“Good man! The railroad station, please.”

The cab shot forward and he lay back in the seat, feeling the blood sticky in his groin, his mind suddenly loosening itself in a tumult of thoughts, a shower of broken memories, a cacophony of voices:

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow

Chapter 73

In the convent of the Suore di San Giovanni Battista in Gavinana, Florence, twelve nuns presided over a parochial school, a chapel, and a villa with a pensione for religious-minded visitors. As night gathered over the city, the suora behind the front desk noted with unease the return of the young visitor who had arrived that morning. She had come back from her tour of the city cold and wet, her face bundled up in a woolen scarf, body hunched against the weather.

“Will the signora be having dinner?” she began, but the woman silenced her with a gesture so brusque the suora closed her mouth and sat back.

In her small, simply furnished room, Constance Greene furiously flung off her coat on her way to the bathroom. She bent over the sink, turning on the hot water tap. As the sink filled, she stood before the mirror and unwound the woolen scarf from her face. Beneath it was a silk scarf, stiff with blood, which she gingerly unwrapped.

She peered closely at the wound. She could not see much; her ear and the side of her head were crusted with clotted blood. She dipped a washcloth in the warm water, wrung it out, and gently placed it over her skin. After a moment, she removed, rinsed, and reapplied it. Within minutes, the blood had softened enough for her to cleanse the cut and examine it more clearly.

It wasn't as bad as it had looked at first. The scalpel had scored deeply across her ear but had only nicked her face. She gently probed with her fingers, noting that the cut was exceedingly sharp and clean. It was nothing, although it had bled like a stuck pig—it would heal with hardly a scar.

Scar. She almost laughed out loud as she threw the bloody washcloth into the sink.

She leaned over and examined her face in the mirror. It was thin and haggard, her eyes hollow, lips cracked.

The novels she had read made pursuit sound easy. Characters followed other characters halfway around the world, all the while remaining well rested, fed, refreshed, and groomed. In reality, it was

an exhausting, brutal business. She had hardly slept since she first picked up his trail at the museum; she had barely eaten; she looked like a derelict.

On top of that, the world had proved to be a nightmare beyond all imagining: noisome, ugly, chaotic, and brutally anonymous. It was not at all like the comfortable, predictable, moral world of literature. The great welter of human beings she had encountered were hideous, venal, and stupid—indeed, mere words failed to describe their true loathsomeness. And chasing Diogenes had proved expensive: through inexperience, being cheated, and rash expenditure, she had run through almost six thousand euros in the past forty hours. She had only two thousand left—and no way of getting more.

For forty hours, she had followed him relentlessly. But now he had escaped her. His wound would not slow him down: it was undoubtedly a trifle, like hers. She was certain she had lost his trail for good—he would see to that. He was gone, on to a new identity, and no doubt heading for the safe place he had prepared for just such a flight, years ago.

She had come so close to killing him—twice. If she had a better handgun... if she had known how to shoot... if she had been a millisecond quicker with the blade... he would be dead.

But now he had escaped her. She had lost her chance.

She gripped the sink, staring into her bloodshot eyes. She knew with a certainty the trail would end here. He would flee by taxi, train, or plane, cross a dozen borders, crisscross Europe, before ending up in a place and in a persona he had carefully cultivated. It would be somewhere in Europe, she was sure of that—but the certainty was of little help. It might take a lifetime to find him—or even more.

Nevertheless, a lifetime was what she had. And when she found him, she would know him. His disguises had been good—but no disguise would deceive her. She knew him. He could alter everything possible about his appearance: his face, clothes, eyes, voice, body language. But there were two things he could not alter. His stature was the first. The second, the more important, was something she was sure Diogenes had not thought of: and that was his peculiar scent. That scent she remembered so well, strange and heady, like a mixture of licorice underscored by the keen, dark smell of iron.

A lifetime... She felt a wave of despair so overwhelming that she

swayed over the sink.

Could he have left some clue behind in his hasty departure? But that would mean returning to New York, and by the time she did so, the trail would have grown too cold.

Perhaps he had dropped some unconscious reference, then, in her presence? It seemed most unlikely—he had been so careful. But perhaps, because he had expected her to die, he might have been less than vigilant.

She walked out of the bathroom, sat down on the edge of the bed. She paused a moment to clear her mind as best she could. Then she thought back to their earliest conversations in the library of 891 Riverside. It was a mortifying exercise, excruciatingly painful, like peeling back a raw bandage of memory: and yet she forced herself to continue, summoning up their first exchanges, his whispered words.

Nothing.

She then went over their later meetings, the books he had given her, his decadent disquisitions on sensual living. But there was still nothing, not even the hint of a geographical location.

In my house—my real house, the one that is important to me—I have a library... That was what he had told her once. Was it, like everything else, just a cynical lie? Or was there perhaps a glimmer of truth?

I live near the sea. I can sit in that room, all lights and candles extinguished, listening to the roar of the surf, and I become a pearl diver...

A library, in a house by the sea. That wasn't much help. She ran over the words again and again. But he had been so careful to hide any personal details, except for those lies he had so carefully crafted, such as the suicide scars.

The suicide scars. She realized that, in her recollections, she had been unconsciously avoiding the one event that held out the greatest chance of revealing something. And yet she could not bear to think of it again. Reliving those final hours together—the hours in which she gave herself to him—would be almost as painful as first reading the letter...

But once again a coldness descended over her. Slowly she lay

back on the bed and stared upward into the darkness, remembering every exquisite and painful detail.

He had murmured lines of poetry in her ear as his passion mounted. They had been in Italian:

Ei's'immerge ne la notte,

Ei's'aderge in vèr' le stelle.

He plunges into the night,

He reaches for the stars.

She knew that the poem was by Carducci, but she had never made a careful study of it. Perhaps it was time that she did.

She sat up too quickly and winced from a sudden throbbing in her ear. She went back into the bathroom and went to work on the injury, cleaning it thoroughly, covering it with antibiotic ointment, and then bandaging it as unobtrusively as possible. When she was done, she undressed, took a quick bath, washed her hair, put on fresh clothes. Next, she stuffed the washcloth, towel, and bloody clothes into a garbage bag she found stored in the back of the room's armoire. She gathered up her toiletries and returned them to her suitcase. Pulling out a fresh scarf, she wrapped it carefully around her face.

She closed the suitcase, buckled and strapped it. Then she took the garbage bag and descended to the greeting room of the convent. The sister was still there, and she looked almost frightened by this sudden reappearance.

“Signora, is there something not to your liking?”

Constance opened her wallet. “Quanto costa? How much?”

“Signora, if there is a problem with your room, surely we can accommodate you.”

She pulled out a rumpled hundred-euro bill, placed it on the counter.

“That is too much for not even one night...”

But Constance had already vanished into the cold, rainy dark.

Chapter 74

Two days later, Diogenes Pendergast stood on the port rail of the *traghetto* as it plowed through the heaving blue waters of the southern Mediterranean. The boat was passing the rocky headland of Capo di Milazzo, crowned by a lighthouse and a ruined castle; behind him, sinking into the haze, stood the great hump of Sicily, the blue outline of Mount Etna thrusting into the sky, a plume of smoke trailing off. To his right lay the dark spine of the Calabrian coast. Ahead lay his destination, far, far out to sea.

The great eye of the setting sun had just dipped behind the cape, casting long shadows over the water, limning the ancient castle in gold. The boat was heading north, toward the Aeolian islands, the most remote of all the Mediterranean islands—the dwelling place, or so the ancients believed, of the Four Winds.

Soon he would be home.

Home. He rolled the bittersweet word around in his mind, wondering just what it meant. A refuge; a place of retreat, of peace. He removed a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, took shelter in the lee of the deck cabin, and lit one, inhaling deeply. He had not smoked in more than a year—not since he had last returned home—and the nicotine helped calm his agitated mind.

He thought back to the two days of hectic traveling he had just completed: Florence, Milan, Lucerne—where he'd had his wound stitched at a free clinic—Strasbourg, Luxembourg, Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Warsaw, Vienna, Ljubljana, Venice, Pescara, Foggia, Naples, Reggio di Calabria, Messina, and finally Milazzo. A forty-eight-hour ordeal of train travel that had left him weak, sore, and exhausted.

But now, as he watched the sun dying in the west, he felt strength and presence of mind returning. He had shaken her in Florence; she had not, could not have, followed him. From there, he had changed identities several times, confused his trail to such an extent that neither she nor anyone else could hope to untangle it. The open borders of the EU, combined with the crossing into Switzerland and re-entry into the EU under a different identity, would confound even the most persistent and subtle pursuer.

She would not find him. Nor would his brother. Five years, ten years, twenty—he had all the time in the world to plan his next—his final—move.

He stood at the rail, inhaling the breath of the sea, feeling a modicum of peace steal over him. And for the first time in months, the interminable, dry, mocking voice in his head fell to a susurrus, almost inaudible amid the sound of the bow plowing the sea:

Goodnight Ladies: Goodnight sweet Ladies: Goodnight, goodnight.

Chapter 75

Special Agent Aloysius Pendergast got off the bus at Viale Giannotti and walked through a small park of sycamore trees past a shabby merry-go-round. He was dressed as himself—now that he was safely out of the United States, there was no need for disguise. At Via di Ripoli, he took a left, pausing before the huge iron gates that led into the convent of the Sisters of San Giovanni Battista. A small sign identified it only as Villa Merlo Bianco. Beyond the gates, he could hear the mingled cries of schoolchildren at recess.

He pressed the buzzer and, after a moment, the gates opened automatically, leading into a graveled courtyard before a large ocher villa. The side door was open, and a small sign identified it as guest reception.

“Good morning,” he said in Italian to the small, plump nun at the desk. “Are you the Suor Claudia I spoke to?”

“Yes, I am.”

Pendergast shook her hand. “Pleased to know you. As I mentioned over the phone, the guest we spoke of—Miss Mary Ulciscor—is my niece. She has run away from home, and the family is extremely worried about her.”

The plump nun was almost breathless. “Yes, signore, in fact I could see she was a very troubled young lady. When she arrived, she had the most haunted look in her face. And then she didn’t even stay the night—arrived in the morning, then returned that evening and insisted on leaving—”

“By car?”

“No, she came and left on foot. She must have taken the bus, because taxis always come in through the gates.”

“What time would that have been?”

“She returned about eight o’clock, signore. Soaking wet and cold. I think she might have been sick.”

“Sick?” Pendergast asked sharply.

"I couldn't be sure, but she was hunched over a bit, and her face was covered."

"Covered? With what?"

"A dark blue woolen scarf. And then not two hours later, she came down with her luggage, paid too much money for a room she hadn't even slept in, and left."

"Dressed the same?"

"She'd changed her clothes, had on a red woolen scarf this time. I tried to stop her, I really did."

"You did all you could, Suora. Now, may I see the room? You needn't bother coming—I'll take the key myself."

"The room's been cleaned, and there's nothing to see."

"I would prefer to check it myself, if you don't mind. One never knows. Has anyone else stayed there?"

"Not yet, but tomorrow a German couple..."

"The key, if you would be so kind."

The nun handed him the key. Pendergast thanked her, then walked briskly through the piano nobile of the villa and mounted the stair.

He found the room at the end of a long hall. It was small and simple. He closed the door behind him, then immediately dropped to his knees. He examined the floor, searched under the bed, searched the bathroom. To his great disappointment, the room had been fanatically cleaned. He stood up, looked around thoughtfully for a minute. Then he opened the armoire. It was empty—but a careful look revealed a small, dark stain in the far corner. He dropped to his knees again, reached in, and touched it, scratching a bit up with his fingernail. Blood—dry now, but still relatively fresh.

Back in the reception room, the nun was still deeply concerned.

"She seemed troubled, and I can't imagine where she went at ten o'clock at night. I tried to talk to her, signore, but she—"

"I'm sure you did all you possibly could," Pendergast repeated. "Thank you again for your help."

He exited the villa onto Via di Ripoli, deep in thought. She had left at night, in the rain... but for where?

He entered a small café at the corner of Viale Giannotti, ordered an espresso at the bar, still pondering. She had encountered Diogenes in Florence, that much was certain. They had fought; she had been wounded. It seemed incredible that she was only hurt, for normally, those who came within Diogenes's orbit did not leave it alive. Clearly, Diogenes had underestimated Constance. Just as he himself had done. She was a woman of vast, unexpected depths.

He finished the coffee, bought an ATAF ticket at the bar, and stepped across the viale to wait for the bus into the city center. When it arrived, he made sure he was the last one on. He held up a fifty-euro note to the driver.

"You don't pay me, stamp your ticket at the machine," the driver said crossly, pulling roughly out of the bus stop, his hammy arms swinging the wheel around.

"I want information."

The driver continued to ignore the money. "What kind of information?"

"I'm looking for my niece. She got on this bus around ten o'clock two nights ago."

"I drive the day bus."

"Do you have the name of the night driver and his cell number?"

"If you weren't a foreigner, I'd say you were a sbirro, a cop."

"It's not a police matter. I'm just an uncle looking for his niece." Pendergast softened his voice. "Please help me, signore. The family is frantic."

The driver negotiated a turn, then said, his tone more sympathetic, "His name is Paolo Bartoli, 333-662-0376. Put your money away—I don't want it."

Pendergast got off the bus at Piazza Ferrucci, pulled out the cell phone he had acquired on arrival, dialed the number. He found Bartoli at home.

“How could I forget her?” the bus driver said. “Her head was swaddled in a scarf, you couldn’t see her face, her voice all muffled. She spoke an old-fashioned Italian, used the *voi* form with me—I haven’t heard that since the days of the Fascists. She was like a ghost from the past. I thought maybe she was crazy.”

“Do you remember where she got off?”

“She asked me to stop at the Biblioteca Nazionale.”

It was a long walk from Ferrucci to the National Library, which stood across the Arno River, its brown baroque facade rising in sober elegance from a dirty piazza. In the cold, echoing reading room, Pendergast found a librarian who remembered her as well as the bus driver had.

“Yes, I was working the night shift,” the librarian told him. “We have few visitors at that hour—and she looked so lost, so desolate, I couldn’t keep my eyes off her. She stared at a particular book for over an hour. Never turning the pages, always on the same page, murmuring to herself like a crazy woman. It got on toward midnight and I was getting ready to ask her to leave so I could close. But then all of a sudden, she jumped up, consulted another book—”

“What other book?”

“An atlas. She pored over it for perhaps ten minutes—scribbling furiously in a small notebook as she did so—and then ran out of the library as if the hounds of hell were after her.”

“Which atlas?”

“I didn’t notice—it’s one of those on the far reference shelf, she didn’t have to fill out a slip to look at them. But let’s see, I do still have the slip she filled out for the book she stared at for so long. Just a moment, I’ll collect it for you.”

A few minutes later, Pendergast was seated where Constance had sat, staring at the same book she had stared at: a slim volume of poems by Giosuè Carducci, the Italian poet who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1906.

The volume sat in front of him, unopened. Now, with infinite care, he upended it and allowed it to fall open naturally; hoping, as books will sometimes do, that it would open to the last page that had been read. But it was an old, stiff book, and it merely fell open to the

front endpapers.

Pendergast reached into the pocket of his suit jacket, drew out a magnifying glass and a clean toothpick, and began turning the pages of the book. For each page he turned, he gently dragged the toothpick along the gutter, then examined the dirt, hair, and fibers that had been exposed with his magnifying glass.

An hour later, on page 42, he found what he was looking for: three red fibers of wool, curled as if from a knitted scarf.

The poem that straddled both pages was called “La Leggenda di Teodorico,” the Legend of Theodoric.

He began to read:

Su 'l castello di Verona

Batte il sole a mezzogiorno,

Da la Chiusa al pian rintrona

Solitario un suon di corno...

Above the great castle of Verona,

Beats the brutal midday sun,

From the Mountains of Chiusa, across the plains,

Resounds the dreaded horn of doom...

The poem recounted the strange death of the Visigothic king Theodoric. Pendergast read it once, and then again, failing to see what momentous importance Constance could have attached to it. He read it again slowly, recalling the obscure legend.

Theodoric was one of the earliest of the great barbarian rulers. He carved a kingdom for himself from the corpse of the Roman Empire, and among other brutal acts he executed the brilliant statesman and philosopher Boethius. Theodoric died in 526. Legend had it that a holy hermit, living alone on one of the Aeolian islands off the coast of Sicily, swore that in the very hour of Theodoric's death, he witnessed the king's shrieking soul being cast into the throat of the great volcano of Stromboli, believed by the early Christians to be the entrance of hell itself.

Stromboli. The Doorway to Hell. In a flash, Pendergast understood.

He rose, walked over to the shelf of atlases, and selected the one of Sicily. Returning to his seat, he carefully opened it to the page displaying the Aeolian islands. The outermost of these was the island of Stromboli, which was essentially the peak of a live volcano that rose abruptly from the sea. A lone village hugged its surf-pounded shore. The island was exceedingly remote and difficult to reach, and the volcano of Stromboli itself had the distinction of being the most active in Europe, in almost continual eruption for at least three thousand years.

He carefully wiped the page with a folded white linen handkerchief, then examined it with his magnifying glass. There, stuck to the linen weft, was another curled red wool fiber.

Chapter 76

Diogenes Pendergast stood on the terrace of his villa. Below him, the tiny whitewashed village of Piscità crowded down to the broad, black-sand beaches of the island. A wind came in from the sea, bringing with it the scent of brine and flowering ginestra. A mile out to sea, the automatic lighthouse on the immense rock of Strombolicchio had begun winking in the gathering dusk.

He sipped a glass of sherry, listening to the distant sounds from the town below—a mother calling her children in to dinner, a dog barking, the buzz of a three-wheeled Ape, the only kind of passenger vehicle used on the island. The wind was rising, along with the surf—it was going to be another roaring night.

And behind him, he heard the thunderous rumble of the volcano.

Here, at the very edge of the world, he felt safe. She could not follow him here. This was his home. He had first come here twenty years before, and then almost every year since, always arriving and departing with the utmost care. The three hundred or so year-round residents of the island knew him as an eccentric and irascible British professor of classics who came periodically to work on his magnum opus—and who did not look with favor on being disturbed. He avoided the summer and the tourists, although this island, being sixty miles from the mainland and inaccessible for days at a time due to violent seas and the lack of a port, was far less visited than most.

Another rolling boom. The volcano was active tonight.

He turned, glancing up its steep, dark slopes. Angry clouds writhed and twisted across the volcanic crater, towering more than a half mile above his villa, and he could see the faint flashes of orange inside the jagged cone, like the flickering of a defective lamp.

The last gleam of sunlight died on Strombolicchio and the sea turned black. Great rollers creamed in long white lines up the black beach, one after another, accompanied by a monotonous low roar.

Over the past twenty-four hours, with enormous mental effort, Diogenes had expunged from his mind the raw memory of recent events. Someday—when he had acquired a little distance—he would

sit down and dispassionately analyze what had gone wrong. But for now he needed to rest. After all, he was in his prime; he had all the time in the world to plan and execute his next attack.

But at my back I always hear

Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near

He gripped the delicate glass so tightly it snapped, and he dashed the stem to the ground and went into the kitchen, pouring himself another. It was part of a supply of amontillado he had laid down years before, and he hated to waste a drop.

He took a sip, calming himself, then strolled back onto the terrace. The town was settling down for the night: a few more faint calls, a wailing baby, the slamming of a door. And the buzz of the Ape, closer now, in one of the crooked streets that rose toward his villa.

He put the glass down on the parapet and lit a cigarette, drawing in the smoke, exhaling into the twilit air. He peered down into the streets below. The Ape was definitely coming up the hill, probably on Vicolo San Bartolo... The tinny whine drew still closer, and for the first time Diogenes felt a twinge of apprehension. The dinner hour was an unusual time for an Ape to be out and about, especially in the upper village—unless it was the island taxi taking someone somewhere. But it was early spring and there were no tourists: the ferry he had taken from Milazzo had carried no visitors, only produce and supplies; and besides, it had departed hours ago.

He chuckled at himself. He had grown too wary, almost paranoid. This demonic pursuit—coming hard on the heels of such a huge failure—had left him shaken, unnerved. What he really needed was a long period of reading, study, and intellectual rejuvenation. Indeed, now would be the perfect time to begin that translation of Aureus Asinus by Apuleius that he had always intended.

He drew in more smoke, exhaled easily, turned his eyes to the sea. The running lights of a ship were just rounding Punta Lena. He went inside, brought out his binoculars, and—looking to sea again—was able to make out the dim outline of an old wooden fishing boat, a real scow, heading away from the island toward Lipari. That puzzled him: it had not been out fishing, not in this weather at this time of day. It had probably been making a delivery.

The sound of the Ape approached and he realized it was now

coming up the tiny lane leading to his villa—hidden by the high walls surrounding his grounds. He heard the engine slow as it came to a stop at the bottom of his wall. He put down the binoculars and strode to the side terrace, from where he had a view down the lane; but by the time he got there, the Ape was already turning around—and its passenger, had there been one, was nowhere to be seen.

He paused, his heart suddenly beating so hard he could hear the roar of blood in his ears. His was the only residence at the end of the lane. That old fishing scow hadn't brought cargo—it had brought a passenger. And that passenger had taken the Ape to the very gates of his villa.

He exploded into silent action, running inside, dashing from room to room, shuttering and barring the windows, turning off the lights, and locking the doors. The villa, like most on the island, was built almost like a fortress, with heavy wooden shutters and doors bolted with hand-wrought iron and heavy locks. The masonry walls themselves were almost a meter thick. And he had made several subtle improvements of his own. He would be safe in the house—or at least he could gain enough time to think, to consider his position.

In a few minutes, he had finished locking himself in. He stood in his dark library, breathing hard. Once again he had the feeling he had reacted out of sheer paranoia. Just because he'd seen a boat, heard the taxi... It was ridiculous. There was simply no way for her to have found him—certainly not this quickly. He had arrived on the island only the evening before. It was absurd, impossible.

He dabbed his brow with a pocket handkerchief and began to breathe easier. He was being utterly foolish. This business had unnerved him even more than he realized.

He was just feeling around for the light when the knock came: slow—mockingly slow—each boom on the great wooden door echoing through the villa.

He froze, his heart wild once again.

“Chi c'è?” he asked.

No answer.

With trembling fingers, he felt along the library drawers, found the one he was looking for, unlocked it, and removed his Beretta Px4 Storm. He ejected the magazine, checked that it was full, and eased it

back into place. In the next drawer, he found a heavy torch.

How? How? He choked down the rage that threatened to overwhelm him. Could it really be her? If not, why hadn't there been an answer to his call?

He turned on the torch and shone it around. Which was the likeliest entry point? It would probably be the door on the side terrace, closest to the lane and easiest to get to. He crept over to it, unlocked it silently, then carefully balanced the metal key on top of the wrought-iron door handle. Then he retreated to the center of the dark room and knelt in firing stance, letting his eyes adjust to the dark, gun aimed at the door. Waiting.

It was silent within the thick walls of the house. The only sound that penetrated was the periodic deep-throated rumble of the volcano. He waited, listening intently.

Five minutes passed, then ten.

And then he heard it: the clink of the falling key. He instantly fired four shots through the door, covering it in a diamond-shaped pattern. The 9mm rounds would have no trouble penetrating even the thickest part of the door with plenty of velocity left to kill. He heard a gasp of pain; a thud; a scrabbling noise. Another gasp—and then silence. The door, now ajar, creaked open an inch in a gust of wind.

It sounded as if he had killed her. And yet he doubted it. She was too smart. She would have anticipated that.

Or would she? And on the other hand, was it even her? He might have just killed some hapless burglar or delivery boy.

Crouching low, he crept toward the door. As he drew close, he lay flat on the floor and crawled the final few feet. He stopped, his gaze on the narrow crack below the doorjamb. He needed to ease the door open another inch before he could see whether a body lay on the terrace beyond—or whether it was a trick.

He waited—and, when another gust of wind came, he used the opportunity to creak the door a little farther open to expose the terrace to view.

Instantly, two shots rang out, slamming through the door just inches above his head, showering him with splinters. He rolled quickly away, heart pounding. The door was now open a foot, and each gust

of wind pushed it farther ajar. She had fired very low—expecting him to be crouching. If he hadn't been completely prone, he would have been hit.

He stared at the holes her rounds had torn in the woodwork. She had managed to get her hands on a mid-caliber semiautomatic, a Glock from the sound of it. And she had learned at least the basics of how to shoot.

Another, heavier gust of wind blew the door wide open, and it slammed against the wall, then swung to, creaking loudly. Slowly he maneuvered around to its far side, and then with one swift movement kicked the door shut, rolled to a sitting position, and shot the bolt. As he rolled away again, another shot blew a hole in the wood inches from his ear, prickling him with splinters.

As he lay on the floor, breathing hard, he realized now the disadvantage of shutting himself up in the house. He could not see out; he could not know from what direction she would come. Although the house had been somewhat hardened against entry, he had seen no need to arouse local suspicion by making it as secure as the Long Island structure: with a gun, she could shoot the locks or bolts off any door and window. No—it would be better to fight her outside, where his superior strength, his expert shooting ability, and his knowledge of the terrain would put him at a decided advantage.

Had the gunshots been heard? People in town might be calling the police, and that could be awkward. But had they heard? With the wind coming off the water and roaring up through the figs and olive groves—not to mention the periodic booms from the restless volcano—perhaps the sound of the gunshots would not be noted. And as for the police, the only law enforcement on the island during the winter was a nucleo investigativo headed by a lone maresciallo of the carabinieri—who spent his evenings playing briscola at the bar in Ficogrande.

He felt a rush of limb-trembling rage. She had invaded his home, his bolt-hole, his ultimate refuge. This was it: he had nowhere else to go, no other identity to assume. Flushed from here, he would be put to flight like a dog, pursued relentlessly. Even if he eventually escaped, it would take years to find a new safe haven, establish a secure identity.

No: he had to finish it here and now.

Three shots sounded in rapid succession, and he heard one of the

shutters in the breakfast nook hurl open, slamming against the wall with a shuddering crash. He jumped up and, scuttling ahead at a crouch, took cover behind a half-wall of masonry separating the kitchen from the dining area. The wind howled through the open window, banging the shutter.

Had she gotten inside?

He scrambled around the half-wall, jumped up at a run, and swept the torch across the kitchen: nothing. Still running, he slid into the dining room, braced himself against a wall. The key was to keep moving...

Three more shots resounded, this time from the direction of the library, and he could hear another shutter begin to swing wildly in the wind.

That was her game, then: punch holes in his defenses, one by one, until the house was no protection at all. He wouldn't play that game. He had to seize the initiative. He, not she, would choose the terrain for the final confrontation.

He had to get outside—and not only outside, but up the mountain. He knew every switchback of the steep and dangerous trail. She was comparatively weak and would be weaker after her long and exhausting pursuit. On the mountain, every advantage would be his—including the use of a handgun in the dark. Nevertheless, he reminded himself that he had underestimated her at each turn. That could not be permitted to happen again. He was up against the most determined, and perhaps most deadly, adversary of his career.

His thoughts returned to the mountain. The ancient trail had been built almost three thousand years ago by Greek priests to offer sacrifices to the god Hephaestus. About halfway up, the trail branched. A newer trail ran to the summit along the Bastimento Ridge. The ancient Greek trail continued westward, where it had been cut centuries earlier by the Sciara del Fuoco, the legendary Slope of Fire. The Sciara was a continuous avalanche of red-hot lava blocks forced from the crater, which tumbled down a vast ravine a mile broad and three thousand feet deep, to ultimately crash into the sea in explosions of steam. The cliff edge of the Sciara was a hellish, dizzying place, like no other on earth, swept by raging winds of heated air coming off the lava flow.

The Sciara del Fuoco. A perfect solution to his problem. A body

that fell in there would virtually disappear.

Exiting the house would be his point of greatest vulnerability. But she could not be everywhere at once. And even if she was waiting, expecting his exit, she had little chance of hitting him if he kept moving in the dark. It took years to develop handgun skills at that level.

Diogenes crept up to the side door, paused briefly. And then, in one explosive movement, he kicked it open and charged into the darkness. The shots came, as he knew they would, missing him by inches. He dived for cover and returned the shots, suppressing her fire. Then he jumped up, sprinted through the gate, and turned sharply right, racing up a series of ancient lava steps at the top of the lane, which would connect to the trail that wound up the side of the volcano of Stromboli toward the Slope of Fire.

Chapter 77

Special Agent Pendergast leaped off the swaying fishing boat onto the quay at Ficogrande, the boat already backing its engines to get away from the heavy surf along the exposed shore. He stood for a moment on the cracked cement, looking up at the island. It rose abruptly from the water like a black pillar against the dim night sky, illuminated by a fitful quarter-moon. He saw the reddish play of lights in the clouds capping the mountain, heard the boom and roll of the volcano, mingling with the roar of surf at his back and the howling of wind from the sea.

Stromboli was a small, round island, two miles in diameter and conical in shape: barren and forbidding. Even the village—a scattering of whitewashed houses stretched out along a mile of shoreline—looked battered, windswept, and austere.

Pendergast breathed in the moist, sea-laden air and drew his coat more closely around his neck. At the far end of the quay, across the narrow street that paralleled the beach, a row of crooked stuccoed buildings sat crowded together: one was evidently a bar, although the faded sign that rocked in the wind had lost its electric light.

He hurried up the quay, crossed the street, and entered.

A thick atmosphere of cigarette smoke greeted him. At a table sat a group of men—one in the uniform of the carabinieri—smoking and playing cards, each with a tumbler of wine in front of him.

He went to the bar, ordered an espresso completo. “The woman who arrived on the chartered fishing boat earlier this evening...?” he said in Italian to the bartender, and then paused, waiting expectantly.

The man gave the zinc a swipe with a damp cloth, served the espresso, tipped in a measure of grappa. He didn’t seem inclined to answer.

“Young, slender, her face swathed in a red scarf?” Pendergast added.

The bartender nodded.

“Where did she go?”

After a silence, he said, in Sicilian-accented Italian, “Up to the professor’s.”

“Ah! And where does the professor live?”

No answer. He sensed that the card game behind him had paused.

Pendergast knew that, in this part of the world, information was never given out freely: it was exchanged. “She’s my niece, poor thing,” he offered. “My sister’s heart is just about broken, her daughter chasing after that worthless man, that so-called professor, who seduced her and now refuses to do the right thing.”

This had the desired effect. These were Sicilians, after all—an ancient race with antique notions of honor. From behind him, Pendergast heard the scrape of a chair. He turned to see the carabinieri drawing himself up.

“I am the maresciallo of Stromboli,” he said gravely. “I will take you up to the professor’s house.” He turned. “Stefano, bring up the Ape for this gentleman and follow me. I will take the motorino.”

A dark, hairy man rose from the table and nodded at Pendergast, who followed him outside. The three-wheeled motorized cart stood at the curb and Pendergast got in. Ahead, he could see the carabinieri kick-starting his moto. In a moment, they were off, driving along the beach road, the surf roaring on their right, pounding up beaches that were as dark as the night.

After a short drive, they swung inland, winding through the impossibly narrow lanes of the town, rising steeply up the side of the mountain. The lanes grew even steeper, now running through dark vineyards and olive groves and kitchen gardens, enclosed by walls made of mortared lava cinders. A few sprawling villas appeared, dotting the upper slopes. The last one stood hard against the rising mountain, surrounded by a high lava-stone wall.

The windows were dark.

The carabinieri parked his motorbike at the gate and the Ape stopped behind it. Pendergast jumped out, looking up at the villa. It was large and austere, more like a fortress than a residence, graced with several terraces, the one facing the sea colonnaded with old marble columns. Beyond the lava wall stood a lush and extensive

garden of tropical plants, birds of paradise, and giant exotic cacti. It was the very last house on the mountainside, and from Pendergast's vantage point below, it almost seemed as if the volcano were leaning above the house, its rumbling, flickering peak reflecting a menacing bloody orange against the lowering clouds.

Despite everything—despite the extremity of the moment—Pendergast continued to stare. This is my brother's house, he thought.

With an officious swagger, the carabinieri went to the iron gate—which stood open—and pressed the buzzer. And now, spell broken, Pendergast brushed past him, ducked through the gate, and ran at a crouch toward the side door on the terrace, which was banging in the wind.

“Wait, signore!”

Pendergast slipped out his Colt 1911 and pressed himself on the wall against the door, catching it in his hand as it swung to. It was riddled with bullet holes. He glanced around: a shutter outside the kitchen was also open, swinging in the wind.

The carabinieri came puffing up beside him. He eyed the door. “Minchia!” His own firearm came out immediately.

“What is it, Antonio?” said the Ape driver, coming up, the tip of his cigarette dancing in the roaring dark.

“Go back, Stefano. This does not look good.”

Pendergast pulled out a flashlight, ducked into the house, shone it around. Splinters of wood lay scattered across the floor. The beam of the flashlight illuminated a large living room in the Mediterranean style, with cool plastered surfaces, a tiled floor, and heavy antique furniture: spare and surprisingly austere. He had a glimpse, beyond an open door, of an extraordinary library, rising two stories, done up in a surreal pearl gray. He ducked inside, noting that a second shutter in the library had been shot open.

Still, no signs of a struggle.

He strode back to the side door, where the carabinieri was examining the bullet holes. The man straightened up.

“This is a crime scene, signore. I must ask you to leave.”

Pendergast exited onto the terrace and squinted up the dim mountain. "Is that a trail?" he asked the Ape driver, who was still standing there, gaping.

"It goes up the mountain. But they would not have taken that trail—not at night."

The carabinieri appeared a moment later, radio in hand. He was calling the carabinieri caserma on the island of Lipari, thirty miles away.

Pendergast exited through the gate and walked up to the end of the lane. A ruined staircase in stone ran up the side of the hill, joining a larger, very ancient trail on the slope just above. Pendergast knelt, shone his light on the ground. After a moment, he rose and took a dozen steps up the trail, examining it with his light.

"Do not go up there, signore! It is extremely dangerous!"

He knelt again. In a thin layer of dust protected from the wind by an ancient stone step, he could make out the impression of a heel—a small heel. The impression was fresh.

And there, above it, another small, faint print, lying on top of a larger one. Diogenes, pursued by Constance.

Pendergast rose and gazed up the dizzying slope of the volcano. It was so black he could see nothing except the faint flicker of muffled orange light around its cloud-shrouded summit.

"This trail," he called back to the policeman. "Does it go to the top?"

"Yes, signore. But once again, it is very dangerous and is for expert climbers only. I can assure you, they did not go up there. I have called the carabinieri on Lipari, but they cannot come until tomorrow. And maybe not even then, with this weather. There is nothing more I can do, aside from searching the town... where surely your niece and the professor have gone."

"You won't find them in the town," Pendergast said, turning and walking up the trail.

"Signore! Do not take that trail! It leads to the Sciara del Fuoco!"

But the man's voice was carried away in the wind as Pendergast

climbed with all the speed he could muster, his left hand gripping the flashlight, his right the handgun.

Chapter 78

Diogenes Pendergast jogged along a windswept shoulder of lava 2,500 feet up the side of the mountain. The wind blew demonically, lashing the dense ginestra brush that crowded the trail. He paused to catch his breath. Looking down, he could just barely see the dim surface of the sea, flecked with bits of lighter gray that were whitecaps. The lighthouse of Strombolicchio sat alone on its rock, surrounded by a gray ring of surf, blinking its mindless, steady message out to an empty sea.

His eye followed the sea in toward land. From his vantage point, he could make out fully a third of the island, a great swerve of shoreline from Piscità to the crescent beach below Le Schiocciole, where the sea raged in a broad band of white surf. The dim illumination of the town lay sprinkled along the shore: dirty, wavering points of light, an uncertain strip of humanity clinging to an inhospitable land. Beyond and above, the volcano rose massively, like the ribbed trunk of a giant mangrove, in great parallel ridges, each with its own name: Serra Adorno, Roisa, Le Mandre, Rina Grande. He turned, looked up. Above him loomed the immense black fin of the Bastimento Ridge, behind which lay the Sciara del Fuoco—the Slope of Fire. That ridge ran up to the summit itself: still shrouded in fast-moving clouds, blooming with the lurid glow of each fresh eruption, the thunderous booms shaking the ground.

A few hundred meters up, Diogenes knew, the trail split. The left fork cut eastward and switchbacked to the summit crater up the broad cinder slopes of the Liscione. The right fork, the ancient Greek trail, continued westward, climbing the Bastimento and ending abruptly where it was cut by the Sciara del Fuoco.

She would be at least fifteen, twenty minutes behind him by now—he had been pushing himself to the utmost, climbing at maximum speed up the crumbling stone staircases and cobbled switchbacks. It was physically impossible for her to have kept up. That gave him time to think, to plan his next step—now that he had her where he wanted her.

He sat down on a crumbling wall. The obvious mode of attack would be an ambush from the almost impenetrable brush that crowded each side of the trail. It would be simple: he could hide

himself in the ginestra at, say, one of the switchback turns, and shoot straight down the trail as she came up. But this plan had the great disadvantage of being the obvious one, a plan she would most certainly anticipate. And the brush was so thick he wondered if he could even push into it without leaving a ragged hole behind or, at the least, signs of damage visible to a keen eye—and she had a damnably keen eye.

On the other hand, she did not know the trail—could not know the trail. She had arrived at the island and come straight to his villa. No map could convey the steepness, the danger, the roughness of the trail. There was a spot ahead, just below the fork, where the trail ran close under a bluff of hardened lava, looped back around, and then topped the bluff. There were cliffs all around it—there was no way for her to get off the trail at that point. If he waited for her on the bluff above, she would have to pass almost directly underneath him. There was simply no other way for her to go. And because she did not know the trail, she could not anticipate that it doubled back over the bluff.

Yes. That would serve nicely.

He continued up the mountain and in another ten minutes had reached the final switchback and gained the top of the bluff. But as he looked around for a hiding place, he saw there was an even better position—indeed, it was nearly perfect. She would see the bluff as she approached and might anticipate a strike from it. But well before the bluff itself was another ambush point—in the deep shadows below it, half obscured by rocks—that looked to be far subtler; indeed, it was completely invisible from farther down the trail.

With an unutterable feeling of relief that it would soon be over, he carefully took up a position in the shadow of the switchback and prepared to wait. It was a perfect spot: the deep darkness of the night and the natural lines of the terrain making it appear there was no break at all in the rocks behind which he hid. Within fifteen minutes or so, she should appear. After he killed her, he would throw her body into the Sciarra, where it would vanish forever. And he would once again be free.

The fifteen minutes that passed next were the longest of his life. As they ticked on into twenty, he became increasingly uneasy. Twenty-five minutes passed... thirty...

Diogenes found his mind racing with speculation. She could not possibly know that he was there. He was certain she could not have

been alerted to his presence.

Something else might be wrong.

Was she too weak to have climbed this high up the mountain? He had assumed her hatred would carry her far past the point of normal exhaustion. But she was only human; she had to have a breaking point. She had been following him for days, hardly eating and sleeping. On top of that, she would have lost a fair amount of blood. To then climb almost three thousand vertical feet up an unknown and exceedingly dangerous trail at night... maybe she just couldn't make it. Or perhaps she'd been hurt. The decrepit cobbled path was strewn with loose stones and eroded blocks, and the steepest parts—where the ancients had built stone staircases—were slick with rubble and missing many steps, a veritable death trap.

A death trap. It was entirely possible—indeed, even probable—that she had slipped and hurt herself; fallen and twisted an ankle; perhaps even been killed. Did she have a flashlight? He didn't think so.

He checked his watch: thirty-five minutes had now passed. He wondered what to do. Of all the possibilities, the likeliest was that she had been hurt. He would go back down the trail and see for himself. If she was lying there with a broken ankle, or collapsed in exhaustion, killing her would be simple...

He paused. No, that would not do. That was, perhaps, her game plan: to make him believe she'd been hurt, to lure him back down—and then ambush him. A bitter smile passed across his face. That was it, wasn't it? She was waiting him out, waiting for him to descend. But he would not fall into that trap. He would wait her out. Eventually her hatred would force her up the mountain.

Ten more minutes passed, and once again he was beset by doubts. What if he waited for her all night? What if she had declined to bring the battle into the terrain of the mountain itself? What if she had gone back to town and was lying low, planning something new? What if she had alerted the police?

He couldn't bear the thought that this might continue. He could not go on in this manner. It must end this very night. If she would not come to him, he had to force the issue by coming to her.

But how?

He lay on the hard ground, peering down into the murk, his agitation increasing. He tried to think as she would, anticipate what she would do. He could not afford to underestimate her again.

I escape the house, run up the trail. She stands there, wondering if she should follow. What would she do? She knew he would be going up the mountain; she knew he would wait for her, that he intended to fight her on his own ground, on his own terms.

What would she do?

The answer came to him in a flash: find another route. A shorter route. And cut him off. But of course there wasn't another route—

With a sudden, dreadful prickling sensation along his neck, he recalled an old story he had heard told around the island. Back in the eighth century, the Saracens had attacked the island. They had landed at Pertuso, a cove on the far side, and made a bold and dangerous crossing, which required climbing up one side of the volcano and down the other. But they had not taken the Greek trail down—they had blazed their own route in order to fall upon the town from an unexpected direction.

Could she have taken the Saracen trail up?

His mind worked feverishly. He hadn't paid any attention to the old story, treating it as yet another colorful legend, like so many others attached to the island. Did anyone even know today where the Saracen trail went? Did it still exist? And how could Constance have known about it? There probably weren't more than half a dozen people in the world who would know the actual route.

He cursed savagely, racked his brains, trying to remember more of the story. Where did the Saracen trail go?

There was something in the legend about the Saracens losing men into the Filo del Fuoco, a narrow gorge that split off from the Sciara. If that were the case, the trail must have hugged the edge of the Sciara all the way down the Bastimento Ridge—or up it, as the case may be

He rose abruptly. He knew—he knew!—this was what Constance had done. She was a consummate researcher; she had gotten hold of some old atlas of the island. She'd studied it, memorized it. She'd flushed him from his house, like a badger from a bolt-hole, driven him up the more familiar trail. Allowing him to think that it was his own

plan all the time... And meanwhile, she would have cut to the west and taken the secret trail up, flanking him as he'd waited in ambush, wasting minute after precious minute. And now she was above. Waiting for him.

A cold sweat broke out on his brow. He could see the breathtaking subtlety of her plan. She had worked it all out ahead of time. She had expected him to flee his house, run up the trail. And she had expected him to pause somewhere along the trail and wait in interminable ambush, giving her—the weaker one—all the time she needed to get up the Saracen trail to the Bastimento Ridge—

He stood abruptly in horror, eyes focusing on the great black fin of the Bastimento above him. The clouds were tumbling across the peak, the mountain groaning and shaking with each explosion—and then they parted, exposing the ridge to the glare of the eruptions: and in that moment he spied, silhouetted against the horrid lambent glow, a figure in white, dancing... And despite the roar of the wind and the rumbling of the mountain, he was sure he could hear a shrill, manic laughter echoing down toward him...

In a convulsion of fury, he aimed his gun and fired again and again, the bright flashes blinding his own night vision. After a moment, he cursed and lowered the gun, his heart pounding. The ridge was bare, the figure gone.

It was now or never. The end was upon them. He tore up the trail, moving as fast as he could, knowing that she could never hit him in the dark. The fork in the trail loomed ahead, the newer trail running off to the left on a graded path. The right fork was blocked by a fence, rusty concertina wire rattling in the wind, marked by a weather-beaten sign in two languages:

Sciara del Fuoco!

Pericolosissimo!

Vietato a Passare!

Active Lava Flow Ahead!

Extreme Danger!

Do Not Pass!

He leaped over the fence and scrambled up the ancient trail

toward the top of the Bastimento Ridge. There was only one possible outcome. One of them would walk back down the mountain; the other would be thrown into the Sciara.

It remained to be seen who, in the end, would prevail.

Chapter 79

Aloysius Pendergast paused at the fork in the trail, listening intently. Not five minutes before, he had distinctly heard shots—ten of them in all—over the thundering of the volcano. He knelt and examined the ground with his light, quickly determining that Diogenes—and Diogenes alone—had taken the fork blocked by a fence.

There was much about this situation that he had not yet untangled, enigmas wrapped in mysteries. There had been very few footprints—only where dust or sand had blown into pockets of the rock—but even so, Constance's prints had ceased, almost at the beginning of the trail. And yet Diogenes had continued on. Why? Pendergast had been forced to make a choice: search for Constance's prints or follow Diogenes's. And this was no choice at all—Diogenes was the danger, he needed to be found first.

And then, there had been gunshots—but whose? And why so many? Only a person in the grip of panic would fire ten shots in a row like that.

Pendergast scaled the fence and continued up the ancient trail, which had fallen into dangerous ruin. The top of the ridge was perhaps a quarter mile distant, and beyond that he could see only the sky, stained by an angry orange glow. He had to move fast—but with care.

The trail came to a steep part of the ridge, carved into a staircase that ran up the rough lava itself. But the staircase was badly eroded, and Pendergast was forced to holster his sidearm and use both hands to climb it. Just before cresting the top, he leaned into the slope, paused, and removed his gun again, listening. But it was hopeless: the roar and bellow of the volcano was even louder here, and the wind howled ever more fiercely.

He crawled to the top of the ridge, into the stinging wind, and paused once again to reconnoiter. The exposed trail ran along the crest before turning and disappearing around a spike of frozen lava. He jumped to his feet, ran across the exposed ground, and took cover behind the lava, peering ahead. He could see now that a great chasm must lie to his right—no doubt the Sciara del Fuoco. The reddish glow

coming up from it provided an excellent backdrop against which to identify a figure.

He edged around the lava spike, and the Sciara suddenly appeared on his right: a sheer cliff falling away into a steeply pitched chasm, like a huge cleft in the side of the island: half a mile broad, plunging precipitously into a churning, boiling sea hundreds of feet below. Heated air came roaring up the chasm, screaming diagonally over the ridge, carrying with it stinging particles of ash and clouds of sulfurous fumes. And now, in addition to the roar from the mountain, Pendergast could hear a new sound: the crackling and rumbling of huge blocks of living lava, some glowing red-hot, that came bounding down from the crater above, leaping and tumbling into the sea below, where they blossomed into dim white flowers.

He staggered forward into the tearing wind, finding his balance while compensating for the hellish force pushing him back from the brink of the cliff. He examined the ground, but all possible tracks had been scoured away by the wind. He sprinted along the ragged trail, taking cover behind old blocks of lava whenever possible, keeping his center of gravity low. The trail continued, still climbing the ridgeline. Ahead stood an enormous pile of lava blocks, an arrested rockfall, which the trail skirted around, making a sharp right toward the cliff's edge.

He crouched in the shelter of the lava fall, gun at the ready. If there was anyone on this trail, they would be directly ahead of him, at the edge of the cliff.

He spun around the edge of the rock, gun in both hands—and saw a terrifying sight.

At the very edge of the chasm, he could see two figures, silhouetted against the dull glow of the volcano. They were locked in a curious, almost passionate embrace. And yet these were not lovers—these were enemies, joined in mortal struggle, heedless of the wind, or the roar of the volcano, or the extreme peril of the cliff edge on which they stood.

“Constance!” he cried, racing forward. But even as he ran, they began to tip off balance, each raking and clawing at the other, each pulling the other into the abyss—

And then, with a silence worse than any cry, they were gone.

Pendergast rushed up to the edge, almost blown onto his back by

the force of the wind. He dropped to his knees, shielding his eyes, trying to peer into the abyss. A thousand feet below, hardened blocks of dull red lava the size of houses rolled and bounced like pebbles, shedding clouds of orange sparks, the wind screaming up from the volcano's flanks like the wail of the collective damned. He remained on his knees, the wind whipping salt tears from his eyes.

He could barely comprehend what he had seen. It was incredible to him, an impossibility, that Constance—sheltered, fragile, confused Constance—could have pursued his brother to the very ends of the earth, driven him up this volcano, and flung herself into it with him...

He swiped savagely at his eyes, made a second attempt to peer down into the hellish cleft, in the faint hope that something, anything, might be left—and there, not two feet below him, he saw a hand, completely covered with blood, clutching at a small projection of rock with almost superhuman strength.

Diogenes.

And now he heard D'Agosta's voice in his head: You realize there's only one way to take care of Diogenes. When the moment comes...

Without a second thought, Pendergast reached down to save his brother, grasped the wrist with one hand and clutched the forearm with the other, and with a mighty heave leaned back, pulling him up and away from the lip of the inferno. A ragged, wild face appeared over the crest of the rock—not that of his brother, but of Constance Greene.

Seconds later, he had pulled her away from the brink. She rolled onto her back, her chest heaving, arms spread, ragged white dress whipping in the wind.

Pendergast bent over her. "Diogenes... ?" he managed to ask.

"He's gone!" A laugh tore from her bloodied lips and was instantly whisked away by the wind.

Chapter 80

The waiting area for hearing room B consisted of an impromptu collection of seventies-era Bauhaus benches lining an anonymous hallway on the twenty-first floor of One Police Plaza. D'Agosta sat on one of these benches, breathing in the stale air of the hallway: the mingled smells of bleach and ammonia from the nearby men's room; stale perfume; perspiration; and old cigarette smoke, which had permeated the walls too deeply to ever be completely eradicated. Underlying all was the acrid, omnipresent tang of fear.

Fear, however, was the last thing on his own mind. D'Agosta was about to undergo a formal disciplinary hearing that would decide if he could ever serve in law enforcement again—and all he felt was a weary emptiness. For months, this trial had been hanging over his head like the sword of Damocles—and now, for better or worse, it was almost over.

Beside him, Thomas Shoulders, his union-appointed lawyer, shifted on the bench. “Anything else you’d like to review one last time?” he asked in his thin, reedy voice. “Your statement, or their likely line of questioning?”

D'Agosta shook his head. “Nothing more, thanks.”

“The department advocate will be presenting the case for the NYPD. We might have caught a break there. Kagelman’s tough but fair. He’s old-school. The best approach is to play it straight: no evasions, no bull. Answer the questions with a simple yes or no, don’t elaborate unless asked. Present yourself along the lines we discussed—a good cop caught in a bad situation, doing the best he could to see that justice was served. If we can keep it at that level, I’m guardedly optimistic.”

Guardedly optimistic. Whether spoken by an airplane pilot, a surgeon, or one’s own lawyer, the words were not exactly encouraging.

He thought back to that fateful day in the fall, when he had run into Pendergast at the Grove estate, tossing bread to the ducks. It was only six months ago, but what a long strange journey it had been...

“Holding up?” Shoulders asked.

D’Agosta glanced at his watch. “I just want the damn thing to be over with. I’m tired of sitting here, waiting for the axe to drop.”

“You shouldn’t think about it that way, Lieutenant. A disciplinary hearing is just like a trial in any other American court. You’re innocent until proven guilty.”

D’Agosta sighed, shifted disconsolately. And in so doing, he caught a glimpse of Captain Laura Hayward, walking down the busy corridor.

She was coming toward them with that measured, purposeful stride of hers, wearing a gray cashmere sweater and a pleated skirt of navy wool. Suddenly the drab corridor seemed charged with life. And yet the last thing he wanted was for her to see him like this: parked on a bench like some truant awaiting a whipping. Maybe she’d walk on, just walk on, like she’d done that day back in the police substation beneath Madison Square Garden.

But she did not walk on. She stopped before the bench, nodded nonchalantly to him and Shoulders.

“Hi,” D’Agosta managed. He felt himself blushing with embarrassment and shame and felt furious for doing so.

“Hey, Vinnie,” she replied in her dusky contralto. “Have a minute?”

There was a moment of stasis.

“Sure.” He turned to Shoulders. “Could you spare me for a sec?”

“Don’t go far—we’re up soon.”

D’Agosta followed Hayward down to a quieter section of the hallway. She paused, looking at him, one hand unconsciously smoothing down her skirt. Glancing at her shapely legs, D’Agosta felt his heart accelerate further. He searched his mind for something to say, came up with nothing.

Hayward, too, seemed uncharacteristically at a loss for words. Her face looked clouded, conflicted. She opened her handbag, fumbled in it a moment, closed it, tucked it under her arm. They stood there another moment in silence as police officers, technicians, and court

personnel passed by.

“Are you here to give a statement?” D’Agosta finally asked.

“No. I gave my deposition over a month ago.”

“Nothing more to say, then?”

“No.”

A peculiar thrill went through D’Agosta as he realized the implications of this. So she’s kept quiet about my role in the Herkmoor breakout, he thought. She hasn’t told anybody.

“I got a call from an acquaintance in the Justice Department,” she said. “The word’s just come down. As far as the feds are concerned, Special Agent Pendergast has been formally cleared of all charges. Homicide’s officially reopened the case on our end, and it looks as though we’re going to drop all charges against him, too. Based on evidence retrieved from Diogenes Pendergast’s valise, fresh warrants have been issued for Diogenes. Thought you’d want to know.”

D’Agosta slumped with relief. “Thank God. So he’s completely cleared.”

“Of criminal charges, yes. But it’s safe to say he hasn’t made any new friends in the Bureau.”

“Popularity never was Pendergast’s strong suit.”

Hayward smiled faintly. “He’s been given a six-month leave. Whether requested by him or demanded by the Bureau, I don’t know.”

D’Agosta shook his head.

“I thought you might also like to hear about Special Agent Spencer Coffey.”

“Oh?”

“In addition to royally screwing up the Pendergast case, he got embroiled in some kind of scandal at Herkmoor. Seems he was busted down to GS-11 and had a notice of censure placed in his jacket. They’ve reassigned him to the North Dakota field office in Black Rock.”

“He’s gonna need a new pair of long underwear,” D’Agosta said.

Hayward smiled, and an awkward silence settled over them again.

The deputy commissioner of trials approached them from the elevator bank, along with the department special prosecutor. They passed by D'Agosta and Hayward, nodding distantly, then turned and proceeded into the courtroom.

"With Pendergast cleared, you should be, too," Hayward said.

D'Agosta looked down at his hands. "It's a different bureaucracy."

"Yes, but when—"

Abruptly she stopped. D'Agosta looked up to see Glen Singleton walking down the hall, immaculately dressed as usual. Captain Singleton was officially still D'Agosta's boss and was there, no doubt, to testify. When he saw Hayward, he paused in surprise.

"Captain Hayward," he said stiffly. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to watch the proceedings," she replied.

Singleton frowned. "A disciplinary hearing is not a spectator sport."

"I'm aware of that."

"You've already been deposed. Your showing up here in person, without being called to provide fresh information, may imply..." Singleton hesitated.

D'Agosta flushed at the insinuation. He stole a glance at Hayward and was surprised by what he saw. The cloudiness had left her face, and she suddenly looked calm. It was as if, after struggling for a long time, she had reached some private decision.

"Yes?" she asked mildly.

"Might imply a lack of impartiality on your part."

"Why, Glen," Hayward said, "don't you wish the best for Vinnie, here?"

Now it was Singleton's turn to color. "Of course. Of course I do. In fact, that's why I'm here—to bring to the attention of the prosecutor certain new developments that have recently come to our attention.

It's just that we wouldn't want any hint of any improper... well, influence."

"Too late," she replied briskly. "I've already been influenced."

And then—very deliberately—she clasped D'Agosta's hand in her own.

Singleton stared at them for a moment. He opened his mouth, closed it again, at a loss for words. Finally he gave D'Agosta a sudden smile and laid a hand on his shoulder. "See you in court, Lieutenant," he said, giving the word lieutenant special emphasis. Then he turned and was gone.

"What was that supposed to mean?" D'Agosta asked.

"If I know Glen, I'd say you've got a friend in court."

D'Agosta felt his heart accelerate again. Despite the imminent ordeal, he suddenly felt absurdly happy. It was as if a great weight had just been lifted from him: a weight he hadn't even been fully conscious he was carrying.

He turned toward her in a rush. "Listen, Laura—"

"No. You listen." She wrapped her other hand around his, squeezed it tightly. "It doesn't matter what happens in that room. Do you understand me, Vinnie? Because whatever happens, happens to both of us. We're in this together."

He swallowed. "I love you, Laura Hayward."

At that moment, the door of the courtroom opened and the court clerk called his name. Thomas Shoulders rose from the bench, caught D'Agosta's gaze, nodded.

Hayward gave D'Agosta's hand a final squeeze. "Come on, big boy," she said, smiling. "It's showtime."

Chapter 81

Afternoon sun bronzed the hills of the Hudson Valley and turned the wide, slow-moving river into an expanse of brilliant aquamarine. The forests that covered Sugarloaf Mountain and Breakneck Ridge were just leafing out in new bloom, and the entire Highlands wore a feathery mantle of spring.

Nora Kelly sat in a deck chair on the broad porch of the Feversham Clinic, looking down over Cold Spring, the Hudson River, and the red brick buildings of West Point beyond. Her husband prowled back and forth at the edge of the porch, now and then gazing out over the vista, other times darting glances up at the genteel lines of the private hospital.

“It makes me nervous, being back here,” he muttered. “You know, Nora, I haven’t been in this place since I was a patient here myself. Oh, God. I don’t know if I’ve ever told you, but when the weather changes, I can sometimes still feel an ache in my back where the Surgeon—”

“You’ve told me, Bill,” she said with mock weariness. “Many times.”

The turning of a knob, the soft squeak of hinges, and a door opened onto the porch. A nurse in crisp whites stuck out her head. “You can come in now,” she said. “She’s waiting for you in the west parlor.”

Nora and Smithback followed the nurse into the building and down a long corridor. “How is she?” Smithback asked the nurse.

“Much improved, thank goodness. We were all so worried for her—such a dear thing. And she’s getting better every day. Even so, she gets tired easily: you’ll have to restrict your visit to fifteen minutes.”

“The dear thing,” Smithback whispered in Nora’s ear. She poked him playfully in the ribs.

The west parlor was a large, semicircular room that reminded Nora of an Adirondack lodge: polished ceiling beams, pine wainscoting, paper-birch furniture. Oils of sylvan landscapes hung on

the walls. A merry fire leaped and crackled in the massive stone fireplace.

And there—propped in a wheelchair in the center of it all—sat Margo Green.

“Margo,” said Nora, and stopped, almost afraid to speak. Beside her, she heard Smithback draw in his breath sharply.

The Margo Green who sat before them was a mere shadow of the feisty woman who had been both academic rival and friend to her at the museum. She was frighteningly thin, and her white skin lay like tissue paper over her veins. Her movements were slow and considered, like someone long unfamiliar with the use of their limbs. And yet her brown hair was rich and glossy, and in her eye was the same spark of life Nora well recalled. Diogenes Pendergast had sent her to a dark and dangerous place—had almost ended her life—but she was on her way back now.

“Hello, you two,” she said in a thin, sleepy voice. “What day is it?”

“It’s Saturday,” Nora said. “April 12.”

“Oh, good. I hoped it was still Saturday.” She smiled.

The nurse came in and bustled around Margo a moment, propping her up more comfortably in the wheelchair. Then she walked around the room, opening curtains and fluffing pillows before leaving them again. Shafts of radiant light streamed into the parlor, falling over Margo’s head and shoulders and gilding her like an angel. Which in a way, Nora thought, she was: having been brought almost to the brink of death by an unusual cocktail of drugs administered to her by Diogenes.

“We brought you something, Margo,” Smithback said, reaching into his coat and bringing out a manila envelope. “We thought you might get a kick out of it.”

Margo took it, opened it slowly. “Why, it’s a copy of my first issue of *Museology*!”

“Look inside, it’s been signed by every curator of the Anthropology Department.”

“Even Charlie Prine?” Margo’s eyes twinkled.

Nora laughed. “Even Prine.”

They pulled two seats up beside the wheelchair and sat down.

“The place is just plain dull without you, Margo,” Nora said. “You have to hurry up and get well.”

“That’s right,” said Smithback, smiling, his irrepressible good humor returning. “The old pile needs someone to shake it up from time to time, raise some fossil dust.”

Margo laughed quietly. “From what I’ve been reading, the last thing the museum needs right now is more controversy. Is it true four people died in the crush at that Egyptian opening?”

“Yes,” Nora said. “And another sixty were injured, a dozen of them severely.”

She exchanged glances with Smithback. The story that had come out in the two weeks since the opening was that a glitch in the system software caused the sound-and-light show to go out of control, in turn triggering a panic. The truth—that it could have been much, much worse—was so far known only to a select few in the museum and in law enforcement circles.

“Is it true the director was among the injured?” Margo asked.

Nora nodded. “Collopy suffered a seizure of some kind. He’s under psychiatric observation at New York Hospital, but he’s expected to make a full recovery.”

This was true—as far as it went—but of course it wasn’t the full story. Collopy, among several others, had fallen victim to Diogenes’s sound-and-light show, driven half psychotic by the laser pulsing and the low-frequency audio waves. The same might have happened to Nora had she not closed her eyes and covered her ears. As it was, she had suffered nightmares for a week. Pendergast and the others had stopped the show before it could run its full course and inflict permanent damage: and as a result, the prognosis was excellent for Collopy and the others—much better than for the unfortunate tech, Lipper.

Nora shifted in her chair. Someday she would tell Margo everything—but not today. The woman still had a lot of recovery ahead of her.

“What do you think it means for the museum?” Margo asked. “This tragedy at the opening, coming on the heels of the diamond theft?”

Nora shook her head. “At first everybody assumed it was the final straw, especially since the mayor’s wife was among the injured. But it turns out that just the opposite has happened. Thanks to all the controversy, the Tomb of Senef is the hottest show in town. Requests for ticket reservations have been pouring in at an unbelievable rate. I even saw somebody hawking I Survived the Curse T-shirts on Broadway this morning.”

“So they’re going to reopen the tomb?” Margo asked.

Smithback nodded. “Fast-tracking it, too. Most of the artifacts were spared. They hope to have it up and running within the month.”

“Our new Egyptologist is recasting the show,” Nora said. “She’s revising the original script, removing some of the cheesier special effects but keeping much of the sound-and-light show intact. She’s a great person, wonderful to work with, funny, unpretentious—we’re lucky to have her.”

“The news reports mentioned some FBI agent as instrumental in the rescue,” Margo said. “That wouldn’t happen to be Agent Pendergast, by any chance?”

“How did you guess?” Nora asked.

“Because Pendergast always manages to get into the thick of things.”

“You’re telling me,” Smithback said, smile fading. Nora noticed him unconsciously massaging the hand that had been burned by acid.

The nurse appeared in the doorway. “Margo, I’ll need to take you back to your room in another five minutes.”

“Okay.” She turned back to them. “I suppose he’s been haunting the museum ever since, asking questions, intimidating bureaucrats, and making a nuisance of himself.”

“Actually, no,” Nora said. “He disappeared right after the opening. Nobody has seen or heard from him since.”

“Really? How strange.”

“Yes, it is,” Nora said. “It’s very strange indeed.”

Chapter 82

In late May, on the island of Capraia, two people—a man and a woman—sat on a terrace attached to a neat whitewashed house overlooking the Mediterranean. The terrace stood near the edge of a bluff. Below the bluff, surf crawled around pillars of black volcanic rock, wreathed in circling gulls. Beyond lay a blue immensity, stretching as far as the eye could see.

On the terrace, a table of weather-beaten wood was spread with simple food: a round of coarse bread, a plate of small salamis, a bottle of olive oil and a dish of olives, glasses of white wine. The scent of flowering lemons lay heavy in the air, mingling with the perfume of wild rosemary and sea salt. Along the hillside above the terrace, rows of grapevines were shooting out of coiling tendrils of green. The only sound was the faint cry of gulls and the breeze that rustled through a trellis of purple bougainvillea.

The two sat, sipping wine and speaking in low voices. The clothes the woman wore—battered canvas pants and an old work shirt—stood in contrast to her finely cut features and the glossy mahogany hair that spilled down her back. The man's dress was as formal as the woman's was informal: black suit of Italian cut, crisp white shirt, understated tie.

Both were watching a third person—a beautiful young woman in a pale yellow dress—who was strolling aimlessly through an olive grove beside the vineyard. From time to time, the young woman stopped to pick a flower, then continued on, twisting the flower in her hands, plucking it to pieces in an absentminded way.

"I think I understand everything now," the woman on the terrace was saying, "except there's one thing you didn't explain: how in the world did you remove the GPS anklet without setting off the alarm?"

The man made a dismissive gesture. "Child's play. The plastic cuff had a wire inside it that completed a circuit. The idea was that, in removing the cuff, you'd need to cut the wire—thus breaking the circuit and triggering an alarm."

"So what did you do?"

“I scratched away the plastic in two places along the circuit to expose the wire. Then I attached a loop of wire to each spot, cut the bracelet in between—and took it off. Elementary, my dear Viola.”

“Ah, je vois! But where did you get the loop of wire?”

“I made it with foil gum wrappers. I was, unfortunately, obligated to masticate the gum, since I needed it to affix the wire.”

“And the gum? Where did you get that?”

“From my acquaintance in the cell next door, a most talented young man who opened a whole new world for me—that of rhythm and percussion. He gave me one of his precious packs of gum in return for a small favor I did him.”

“What was that?”

“I listened.”

The woman smiled. “What goes around comes around.”

“Perhaps.”

“Speaking of prison, I can’t tell you how thrilled I was to get your wire. I was afraid you wouldn’t be permitted to leave the country for ages.”

“Diogenes left behind enough evidence in his valise to clear me of the murders. That left only three crimes of substance: stealing Lucifer’s Heart; kidnapping the gemologist, Kaplan; and breaking out of prison. Neither the museum nor Kaplan cared to press charges. As for the prison, they would like nothing more than to forget their security was fallible. And so here I am.”

He paused to sip his wine. “That leads me to a question of my own. How is it that you didn’t recognize Menzies as my brother? You’d seen him in disguise before.”

“I’ve wondered about that,” Viola replied. “I saw him as two different people, but neither one was Menzies.”

There was a silence. Viola let her gaze drift again toward the younger woman in the olive grove. “She’s a most unusual girl.”

“Yes,” the man replied. “More unusual than you could even imagine.”

They continued to watch the younger woman drift aimlessly through the twisted trees, like a restless ghost.

“How did she come to be your ward?”

“It’s a long and rather complicated story, Viola. Someday I’ll tell you—I promise.”

The woman smiled, sipped her wine. For a moment, silence settled over them.

“How do you like the new vintage?” she asked. “I broke it out especially for the occasion.”

“As delightful as the old one. It’s from your grapes, I assume?”

“It is. I picked them myself, and I even stomped out the juice with my own two feet.”

“I don’t know whether to be honored or horrified.” He picked up a small salami, examined it, quartered it with a paring knife. “Did you shoot the boar for these, as well?”

Viola smiled. “No. I had to draw the line somewhere.” She looked at him, her gaze growing concerned. “You’re making a valiant effort to be amusing, Aloysius.”

“Is that all it appears to be—an effort? I am sorry.”

“You’re preoccupied. And you don’t look especially good. Things aren’t going well for you, are they?”

He hesitated a moment. Then, very slowly, he shook his head.

“I wish there was something I could do.”

“Your company is tonic enough, Viola.”

She smiled again, her gaze returning to the young woman. “Strange to think that murder—and there’s really no other word for it, is there?—could have been such a cathartic experience for her.”

“Yes. Even so, I fear she remains a damaged human being.” He hesitated. “I realize now it was a mistake to keep her shut up in the house in New York. She needed to get out and see the world. Diogenes exploited that need. I made a mistake there, too—allowing her to be vulnerable to him. The guilt, and the shame, are with me always.”

“Have you spoken of this to her? Your feelings, I mean. It might be good for both of you.”

“I’ve tried. More than once, in fact. But she violently rejects any possibility of a discussion on that topic.”

“Perhaps that will change with time.” Viola shook out her hair. “Where do you plan to go next?”

“We’ve already toured France, Spain, and Italy—she seems interested in the ruins of ancient Rome. I’ve been doing everything I can to take her mind off what happened. Even so, she’s preoccupied and distant—as you can see.”

“I think what Constance needs most is direction.”

“What sort of direction?”

“You know. The kind of direction a father would give a daughter.”

Pendergast shifted in his chair, ill at ease. “I’ve never had a daughter.”

“You’ve got one now. And you know what? I think this whole Grand Tour you’ve been taking her on isn’t working.”

“The same thought had occurred to me.”

“You need healing—both of you. You need to get over this, together.”

Pendergast was silent for a moment. “I’ve been thinking about retreating from the world for a time.”

“Oh?”

“There’s a monastery I once spent some time at. A very secluded one, in western Tibet, exceedingly remote. I thought we might go there.”

“How long would you be gone?”

“As long as it takes.” He took a sip of wine. “A few months, I’d imagine.”

“That might be most beneficial. And it brings me to something

else. What's next... for us?"

He slowly put down the glass. "Everything."

There was a brief silence. "How do you mean?" Her voice was low.

"Everything is open to us," said Pendergast slowly. "When I have settled Constance, then it will be our turn."

She reached out and touched his hand. "I can help you with Constance. Bring her to Egypt this winter. I'll be resuming work in the Valley of the Kings. She could assist me. It's a rugged, adventurous life, working as an archaeologist."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course."

Pendergast smiled. "Excellent. I think she would like that."

"And you?"

"I suppose... I would like that, too."

Constance had drifted closer, and they fell silent.

"What do you think of Capraia?" Viola called over as the girl stepped onto the terrazzo.

"Very nice." She walked to the balustrade, tossed over a mangled flower, and rested her arms on the warm stone, staring out to sea.

Viola smiled, nudged at Pendergast. "Tell her the plan," she whispered. "I'll be inside."

Pendergast stood and walked over to Constance. She remained at the railing, looking out to sea, the air stirring her long hair.

"Viola's offered to take you to Egypt this winter, to assist her with her excavations in the Valley of the Kings. You could not only learn about history, you could touch it with your own hands."

Constance shook her head, still staring out to sea. A long silence followed, filled by the distant cries of the seagulls, the muffled whisper of the surf below.

Pendergast drew closer. "You need to let go, Constance," he said. "You're safe now: Diogenes is dead."

"I know," she replied.

"Then you know there's nothing more to fear. All that's past. Finished."

Still she said nothing, her blue eyes reflecting the vast azure emptiness of the sea. Finally she turned toward him. "No, it isn't," she said.

Pendergast looked back at her, frowning. "What do you mean?"

For a moment, she did not answer.

"What do you mean?" he repeated.

At last Constance spoke. And when she did, her voice was so weary, so cold, that it chilled him despite the warm May sunshine.

"I'm pregnant."

THE PRESTON-CHILD NOVELS

A WORD FROM THE AUTHORS

We are frequently asked in what order, if any, our books should be read.

The question is most applicable to the novels that feature Special Agent Pendergast. Although most of our novels are written to be stand-alone stories, very few have turned out to be set in discrete worlds. Quite the opposite: it seems the more novels we write together, the more “bleed-through” occurs between the characters and events that comprise them all. Characters from one book might appear in a later one, for example, or events in one novel could spill into a subsequent one. In short, we have slowly been building up a universe in which all the characters in our novels, and the experiences they have, take place and overlap.

Reading the novels in a particular order, however, is rarely necessary. We have worked hard to make almost all of our books into stories that can be enjoyed without reading any of the others, with a few exceptions.

Here, then, is our own breakdown of our books.

THE PENDERGAST NOVELS

Relic was our first novel, and the first to feature Special Agent Pendergast, and as such has no antecedents.

Reliquary is the sequel to Relic.

The Cabinet of Curiosities is our third Pendergast novel, and it stands completely on its own.

Still Life with Crows is next. It is also a self-contained story (although people curious about Constance Greene will find a little information here as well as in The Cabinet of Curiosities).

Brimstone is next, and is the first novel in what we informally call the Pendergast trilogy. Although it is also self-contained, it does pick up some threads begun in The Cabinet of Curiosities.

Dance of Death is the middle novel of the Pendergast trilogy. While it can be read as a stand-alone book, readers may wish to read Brimstone before Dance of Death.

The Book of the Dead is the last, culminating novel in the Pendergast trilogy. For greatest enjoyment, the reader should read at least Dance of Death first.

THE NON-PENDERGAST NOVELS

We have also written a number of self-contained tales of adventure that do not feature Special Agent Pendergast. They are, by date of publication, *Mount Dragon*, *Riptide*, *Thunderhead*, and *The Ice Limit*.

Thunderhead introduces the archaeologist Nora Kelly, who appears in all the later Pendergast novels. *The Ice Limit* introduces Eli Glinn, who appears in *Dance of Death* and *The Book of the Dead*.

In closing, we want to assure our readers that this note is not intended as some kind of onerous syllabus, but rather as an answer to the question *In what order should I read your novels?* We feel extraordinarily fortunate that there are people like you who enjoy reading our novels as much as we enjoy writing them.

With our best wishes,

Douglas Preston

Lincoln Child

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